

彼はやつぱり 気づがない4

望公太

NOZOMI KOTA

イラスト: タカツキイチ



I Really Don't Notice

vol.4

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Novel Updates

Translation Group: [Yoraikun Translation](#)

Epub: [Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

「私は未来から来た人間なんだ」

今にも泣き出しそうな表情になりながら、
彼女は——自己紹介をした。

僕はバツぱりやつぱり^{うがなひ}4

Her expression as if she would burst into tears at any moment.
She... introduced herself.

"I am a time traveler from the future."



Our club president declared with a full-face smile.

"It's a swimsuit episode!"

.....

Bloody otaku.



青い戦士と黒い戦士が激突する。
剣と剣が交わって響いた鈍い音が、
開戦の合図となつた。

Blue and black warrior collided.

Sword mingled with sword, the dull sound ringing out the signal of the war's

onset.

Prologue

What was Princess Kaguya thinking?

An existence that could never have existed came to another world, crying, laughing, getting angry, at times happy, at times sad, acting as if she had always belonged there. What could have been going through her head?

Knowing she would one day return to the moon, what mentality did she hold as she lived with the old man and woman? The main character of this story is Princess Kaguya.

But I do not hold the means to tell the tale of her summer.

It was a story like a dream.

Not vivid by any means, the dream of a summer's day, passing by like a heat haze.

Yet—neither was it a nightmare.

Morning, the first day of training camp.

How should I put it, it was summer. A blue ocean and white sand beach expanded before my eyes. The sky was so clear it couldn't be any clearer, the sunlight pricking into my exposed skin.

If this isn't summer, I don't know what is.

"Maan, this year sure is hot."

"Kagoshima-senpai. Please make that rampart a little thicker."

My stylish jest was obstructed by serious orders.

For a certain reason, the five members of the ComClub were spending their time on a fully-reserved beach. Kurisuchan and I were building a sandcastle, and Kurisuchan seemed to be hooked, as the western-styled fortress nearing its glorious completion was going through the process of excessive detail.

If you're wondering why we're doing something like this,

"Alright! That's match point! Not lookin' so hot anymore, are ya Orino!"

"Kuu... t-this is where the real battle begins."

It was because Kikyouin-san and Orino-san had begun a beach volleyball battle. At first, it was four of us (Kagoshima and Kurisu vs Orino and Kikyouin)

but ever since Orino accidentally smashed her serve into Kikyouin-san's head, something went awry.

Of small calibre in the strangest places, Kikyouin-san naturally returned the favor, and childish in the strangest places, Orino-san happily obliged... an endless loop, and in the end, "We'll settle this one on one!" was the final development.

"... They're really going at it," I let out a light sigh.

Turning my back to the two carrying on a high-level match unthinkable for normal high school girls, I returned to constructing the castle.

From behind,

"Probability of a feint, eighty-seven percent." "The ball split!?" "There are two... Kikyouin-san's..." "My god, she's discovered the golden rectangle...?" "The ball disappeared!?" "Wait, it's returning like a boomerang..." "Y-you intend to play doubles on your own..." "Kuh. No matter where I hit it, the ball's drawn to Orino like a magnet..."

I heard some lines that should never make their way out the pages of the Prince of Tennis, but there's no way they were carrying out such a superhuman battle, right?

Separate from the two hustling under the blazing sun, Kurisuchan and I piled our sand bit by bit.

"It's almost complete."

"Yes... no, please wait. Isn't it best we secure a space here to deploy anti-flying-dragon barrier sequences... and if we don't make the magic circulation system more complex and add in some fake-outs, the enemy will see us through..."

"....."

Kurisuchan's obsession lay in the strangest places.

It felt wrong to get in the way of the girl growing zealous in her sand play as if possessed by something, so I quietly left her be.

Good grief.

Me included, it looks like everyone's in high spirits.

Well, who could blame them? I mean, today was the first day of training camp. Just imagining the sort of camp life we'd be living raised team morale. Or so it should have, yet—

“Are you alright, Kagurai-senpai?”

A beach parasol erected a short distance from the others. I called out to the girl hugging her knees on the vinyl sheet lain out underneath it.

“... Mn? Y-yeah. I’m fine.”

“If you’re not feeling well, then maybe you should return to the hotel...”

“No. I really am fine. Don’t worry.”

When she said that in a lifeless voice, it only made me all the more worried. The one who seemed like she’d be the most active in this sort of thing, Kagurai-senpai, had been like this since morning. If you struck up conversation, it was nothing but half-hearted replies, she made a sullen face all the way. I wonder what happened.

It was only the first day, she should have enough energy to spare.

“I’m just thinking about some things...”

Her heart didn’t seem to be here, as she gazed absentmindedly at the sky. Somewhere out there, Kikyouin-san’s one hundred and eight times blessed spike pulverized Kurisuchan’s super high-quality stronghold, yet when such an interesting scene had transpired, there was no change in her expression. Her profile looked somewhat tired.

No

Rather than tired... perhaps she looked like she’d had enough.

As if a movie she had already seen was played on repeat again and again.

Such was the face that Kagurai-senpai made.

Chapter 1: Training Camp

The first morning of training camp.

Without being awoken by anything in particular, I naturally opened my eyes.

“... Mnn...”

In my half-asleep head, I squirmed up my body. When I confirmed the time on the analogue clock on the wall, it was a little past seven. I was sleeping in a Japanese-styled six tatami room. While I had my slight misgivings at not being in my own room, I remembered soon enough.

(TL: 6 tatami ~ 10m²)

Not only wasn't it my room, it wasn't even the town I lived in.

This was the guest house 'Sunflower', located right near the beach of another prefecture.

“Ah... I see. Training camp started yesterday.”

No, today to be more precise.

By the time we arrived at Sunflower last night, it was already ten. Numerous train changes had worn us out, and we all fell right asleep. I hazily thought over such things as I got my appearance in order.

“Are you awake~?”

A Japanese folding screen decorated with a painting of a pine tree slid open and Kagurai-senpai appeared.

“I'm up. Good morning. And wait, please don't enter a man's room without knocking.”

“Ha ha ha. Don't sweat the small stuff. You're a man, aren't you?”

Kagurai-senpai gave a hearty laugh. From what I could see from that crisp smile, she wasn't weak in the mornings. Well, this person usually sleeps a lot in that dive thingamajig, so I guess she just can't get sleep deprivation.

“If you were up, you could've paid a visit.”

“I don't have the energy to raid a girl's room so early in the morning. Why are you here so early anyways? As I recall, we were supposed to meet at eight,

right?"

"I was so giddy I woke up early, see."

"Ah, I guess I get'cha."

"I got up at four in the morning."

"Now that's early."

"And the others just weren't getting up, so I snuck under their covers one by one to shock them up, but I got some extremely nasty looks."

"Of course you would."

"However! That's not enough to get me down!"

"Your willpower's at an all-time high!"

Needlessly so! Considerably unnecessary!

"At present, I'm sure the others are trying to desperately erase what I drew on their faces."

"That room sounds fun!"

Drat.

Even if we couldn't lodge men and women together, this feeling of loss is nothing to laugh at.

"I was thinking I'd take a walk; want to come along? Rather, you're coming."

"....."

It seemed I had no right to refuse, so I silently followed her. As I looked at her joyful face, my drowsiness had disappeared somewhere. As the club president, the zeal she poured into this camp was a cut above the rest.

The training camp of our ComClub with no real activities was decided upon as summer break approached its mid-stages. Having committed a failure so grand as ditching end-term exams, the ComClub's early days of summer were spent pursued by remedial lessons.

The last day of those lessons, the road home. As Orino-san, Kikyouin-san, Kurisuchan, Kagurai-senpai and I rounded the school gate the five of us,

"H-hey, you lot, do you want to go to the sea 'r somethin'?"

Kikyouin-san said quite abruptly.

“.....”

Our eyes all went round. None of us had ever expected such an invitation from her.

As if the kid who never invited the others out to play had wrung out all their courage to join the group, a peculiar air flowed between us. In a drama, this might be an emotional scene, but in reality, it was as if the air had stiffened a bit...

“... God. This is why I was against it. I knew it would turn out like this!”

While we were troubled how to react, Kikyouin-san lamented loudly, ruffling her hair into a mess.

“Y-yeah! The sea sounds nice! I was just thinking I wanted to go!”

“Y-yeah, that’s right. I was also just about to say something of the sort!”

While Kagurai-senpai and I promptly followed through, “You’re wrong...” Kikyouin-san shook her head.

“That Tsuchimikado contacted my yesterday.”

The Tsuchimikado she referred to was Tsuchimikado Senzou-san. Third son of the Tsuchimikado House that was apparently famous around Kyoto, and the swindler who deceived me a while ago. According to her, Tsuchimikado-san had conducted an exorcism on guest house Sunflower outside the prefecture. He caught wind of rumors that ghosts appeared, rushed to the scene, and spent three days and nights cleansing evil spirits, it seems.

“n so, that Sunflower place said they’d let him stay for free as thanks, and he passed the buck onto me.”

There Kikyouin-san looked at me.

“I’m sure he intends it in place of interest on his debt to you.”

“Ah, so it’s like that.”

He still hasn’t returned that thirty thousand yen after all. While it’s not like he had no intent to return it, judging by his personality, until things got considerably serious, it didn’t look like I was getting it back.

“But Kikyouin. Is that really alright?” Kagurai-senpai asked.

“Won’t letting five of us stay make for a considerably cost?”

“That part’s, well, within their expectations. To be blunt, all those ghost rumours have sharply decreased their visitors, and barely anyone goes out to play on the nearby beach anymore. So if we stay without heeding the rumours, they’ll actually be thankful, it seems.”

I see.

If customers stopped coming due to bad rumours, then guests who enjoy themselves without giving a lick about them should lighten the rumours’ credibility considerably.

“With exorcisms... it’s often a huge hassle after the ghost’s cleansed as well...”

Those were some profound words from a self-proclaimed onmyouji.

“Hmmm. I see. Then there’s no need to show restraint. One of those win-win situations.”

Kagurai-senpai nodded to herself. Beside her, “B-but...” the ghost-hating Kurisuchan asked in a shaking voice.

“W-will it be alright... It’s a little scary to stay in a place like that...”

“I think you can trust him in that regard. That guy’s skills are the real deal. And if anything happens, I’ll do somethin’ about it.”

At her blunt yet kind words, Kurisuchan breathed a breath of relief.

“If that’s how it is... yeah. That sounds fine.”

Orino-san said, as the voice of the group.

“It sounds fun to go on a trip together. I’m for it.”

“Right. And the beach near the guest house is pretty much reserved for us, right? Hm. Based on how you think about it, this might be our lucky break. We can play without any fear of troubling anyone, eh...”

“The sea with everyone huh. That kinda sounds like club training camp.”

As I casually said it, “Training camp!?” Kagurai-senpai bit on with all her might.

“Training camp... my. What a nice ring to it. My heart trembles... I was just thinking I wanted us to do something as the ComClub. Our first activity the other day was a huge failure...”

When Kagurai-senpai said that mingled with a sigh, everyone stared at me. I'll admit, it's my fault for sleeping so soundly when I hadn't done anything in particular! But no need to drag it on, remedial lessons are already over.

"Alright! Then I hereby announce the ComClub's second official activity!"

Our club president declared with a full-face smile.

"It's a swimsuit episode!"

.....

Bloody otaku.

With breakfast over, we got right to the beach
I finished changing far faster than the girls, so in my swim shorts, I headed to the shore right outside of Guesthouse Sunflower a step ahead of the rest. I wanted to prepare the parasol and floats before the others got here.

"... There really isn't anyone."

I stuck the parasol into the sand with a mumble.
It looked like the story about ghost rumours was true, it really was as if we'd reserved the beach front for ourselves. Even as I looked around, I couldn't spot a single swimmer. At most, an old man walking his dog, and a car in the distance. Meaning, at this very moment, I'm the lone king of the beach... how lonely.

I thought I'd jump for joy at having it all to myself, but having it all is surprisingly lonely.

Won't someone come soon? I thought as I pumped air into the dolphin-shaped float.

"Kept you waiting."

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Orino-san and Kurisuchan appeared.

"The sea sure is nice. The weather's fair, it really does feel like sea weather."

Orino-san wore a white T-shirt over her swimsuit.

“Ah, so the dolphin gets this big when you inflate it! It’s cute!”

Kurisuchan wore a white T-shirt over her swimsuit.

Et tu brute.

“... You people.”

I heard a low voice from behind the T-shirt duo and saw a swaying silhouette. A silhouette clad in an adultish bikini.

“Why are you wearing something over your swimsuit!? That’s against the rules, out!”

Kagurai-senpai grasped the sleeves of Orino-san and Kurisuchan’s shirts. Their bodies jolted in surprise, “No, umm,” came a feeble defence, but it was meaningless.

“Hup! Stripping time! Expose your beautiful body beneath the sun!”

“KyaaAH!”

[IMAGE]

Kurisuchan was the first casualty. Her white veil stripped bare, her swimsuit was exposed. A frilled bikini, terribly cute at that.

“A-aauu...”

With her exposure shooting up, Kurisuchan hung her head shamefully. Her gaze shifting back and forth between me and the white sands.

“K-Kagoshima-senpai... u-umm, how is it... I just bought this swimsuit the other day.”

“Yeah. It really suits you.”

I gave an honest compliment.

“Really?”

“Yep. Really cute.”

“C0cute...”

Tidgetting her fingers, she hung her head again. Was she acting bashful? I really think this part of her is cute.

“Now Orino! Kurisu’s already stripped, now it’s your turn!”

“I-I get it! I’ll take it off myself, so let go of me!”

“Ha ha ha! Foolish mortal knave!”

“Noooooooo!”

Kagurai-senpai and Orino-san were still tussling. While it seemed she was able to strip Kurisuchan all too easily, Orino-san was a hard fight. The reason being... yeah, well, it was a problem of body type. Kurisuchan’s body’s quite streamlined, after all. To put it in Inazuma Eleven terms, she was ‘The Wall’.

“Just strip already, Orino. Fufu. Show that daring cloth to Kagoshima!”

“I-it’s not that daring!”

“Hey, Kagoshima. You want to see Orino in a bikini, don’t you?”

“Ah, no...”

With it suddenly turned to me, I grew nervous.

“Um, well... it would be a lie if I said I didn’t want to see... but I just thought a T-shirt over a swimsuit isn’t bad either. The way you get these brief flashes of the bottom piece from the hem, I think it’s kinda more erotic than being able to see the whole thing. And being able to have fun fantasizing about what the whole thing looks like is—hah!”

By the time I noticed it, I was getting some cold eyes.

Crap, I panicked and said my true thoughts.

“W-wrong! That back there... if I had to equate it to something, right! Just as Milo’s Venus’ lack of arms lets it stir the human imagination, making for a wonderful piece of fine art, T-shirt on swimsuit might be best, on the contrary...”

“... Please don’t hold art in such contempt.”

My junior had completely lost respect for her senior.

“K-Kurisu-chan... please, don’t look at me with those eyes I save for Kagurai-senpai...”

“Did you just casually throw out something cruel!?”

I got the feeling someone screamed something, but I ignored it. There's a time and place for everything. It seemed that the example of Milo's Venus was too hard to understand, so I have to keep it simpler.

“I'm just trying to say nude with knee socks is more erotic than plain nude!”

“.....”

Once my declaration was over, Orino-san swiftly and silently pulled off her T-shirt, showing her bikini. Perhaps she sensed a danger to her chastity. I wonder why when a woman just stripped, I didn't feel too happy about it.

Yaaaaah.

I made a few verbal slips there, I repented.

I really am weak when flustered.

Rather, well, I get the feeling you could say that about every member of the ComClub.

This is a group of people terrible at thinking on their feet.

Sadly, the three women made a dash for the ocean as if to run away from me. Left behind, I entered that lonely air once more.

“Good grief, they're kids the lot of them. Getting so worked up over the borin' old sea.”

Soon after I heard a fed-up voice. It seemed that Kikyouin-san had come as well.

“It's not like it's anything rare. Seventy percent of the earth's surface is water.”

A rebellious line fitting of the contrarian girl.

Unconcerned, or rather, putting on airs. Strangely mature, it seemed that Kikyouin-san wouldn't get worked up over the mere sea.

“Hey now, Kikyouin-san. You can make the point, but the sea is—”

When I turned my neck, Kikyouin-san's swimsuit entered my field of vision and I lost my words.

Her swimsuit was... a flashy leopard print.

She was wearing huge sunglasses on top of that. Those ones that look like a

dragonfly's eyes.

No way. No how...

“... Kikyouin-san.”

“Yes?”

“Could it be this is the first time you've seen the ocean?”

“So it is. So what?”

“No...”

What do I do? This kid's really going all out.

Soaring high over her first beach, and misunderstanding something about it. What a girl of misunderstandings.

“Come to think of it... you're from the west, right?”

“Yeah? Kyoto.”

I see. So Kansai people wear leopard print after all (my prejudice). I'm sure Kikyouin-san will grow into the aunty who walks around town in leopard print.

“Y-yeah. Um, I think it suits you. The sunglasses are also a nice touch...”

I started off by praising her.

Well, if I closed my eyes to the fact it wasn't to my tastes, it's not as if it didn't suit her. Coupled with her light-pigmented hair, she looked like a Hollywood actress.

“Hah? What are you sayin'? I don't really get if it suits me or not. But I'm just wearing the sunglasses because it's too bright. I'm not trying to be fashionable or anything. And the swimsuit's just something I randomly threw on.”

She said restlessly. Her eyes flitted to the dolphin I was blowing up, and the three playing over yonder.

“n wait, in the first place, the sea's just water, right? Salty water. Is that anythin' different from a bath. Aah, I really never wanted to come to the sea. Though since Tsuchimikado begged me, I had no choice in the matter.”

“.....”

She's a tsundere.

This girl is acting tsundere towards the summer sea.

Kikyouin-san set up the beach chair she brought next to the parasol and lay herself over it. Her expression and posture spoke, ‘the sun sure is bright’. She wanted to do something celebrity-ish apparently.

Playing on the beach was enough to fill up the morning hours. After returning to the guest house for lunch, we got back and started the watermelon smashing.

“Kagoshima-kun, right, right, a little more right.”

“No, you want left, go left.”

“Screw that, up, do up. Smash the top of your head with all your might.”

With my eyes blindfolded, various voices flew my ways. Nearby, I could hear Orino-san and Kagurai-senpai’s voices. Despite her insistence, “I’m not going to take part in something so childish,” I could hear Kikyouin-san’s cheers from afar. Now then, whose orders do I trust?

Kikyouin-san is out of the question. There’s a chance that Kagurai-senpai is just shouting out random things to tease me, so moral character-wise, it would be Orino-san.

I concluded, and moved on Orino-san’s orders.

And.

‘Ah, Kurisu. You’re late. Is there no bathroom nearby?’

‘No... I found the bathroom easily enough, but...’

Having returned from picking flowers, I heard Kurisuchan converse with Kikyouin-san.

‘Umm, I ran late looking for something...’

‘You lost somethin’?’

‘Yes... but I couldn’t find it... what should I do, maybe someone stole it...’

‘Calm down, I tell you. What sorta thing are you lookin’ for?’

‘My staff.’

‘Staff. A staff, eh.’

‘I took it out of the storage gem today morning to produce maintenance. After that, I left it out to bask in the sun...’

‘It needs to dry?’

‘Bask, or rather sunbath, perhaps. My staff... The Staff of Calima needs to be periodically charged by the light of the sun.’

‘Hmmm. There’re some similar artifacts in eastern sorcery. Though ours use moonlight more often than not. Even so, a staff, eh... in Tarot, the staff represents fire and innovation.’

‘You know your stuff.’

‘I’ve studied western to an extent as well.’

While I heard the intermingling of magic with eastern spellcraft, I ignored it and concentrated on Orino-san’s orders.

The watermelon is only a little further.

‘So the staff’s gone?’

‘... Yes.’

‘What is it shaped like?’

‘Umm, it’s wood, stands about as tall as I am... the tip goes like swish and then pow. It looks like a normal stick at a glance, but there’s a scarlet crystal embedded in the very top.’

‘Your height, a normal stick, a crystal...’

Just a little. Just a little more.

Kagurai-senpai had stopped teasing, she was giving correct orders—meaning the same orders Orino-san gave, so I was able to move swiftly.

I gripped the stick in my hands... a stick with a nice feel I picked up outside the guest house.

‘K-Kurisu... isn’t it... that?’

‘Heh? Huh...’

““That’s it!””

Orino-san and Kagurai-senpai’s voices overlapped. All or nothing, I lowered the wooden stick towards the watermelon.

“UWOOOOOOAAAAAH!”

‘My staaaaaaaaafffffff!’

The blow with all my body weight behind it brilliantly collided with the watermelon. The sensation conveyed to my hands wasn’t that of smashing into the sand. I could tell.

Finally, I thought. The moment of impact, I got the feeling some unknown power concentrated in the wooden stick, but it was surely my imagination. The next instant—

Something exploded.

“U-uwaaaaah!”

Liquid slathered all over my body, sending me falling on my backside. I frantically pulled off the blindfold—to find the watermelon blasted all over. Its green skin was strewn around, the red contents radiating about the white sands.

W-whaaaaat?

What just happened?

T-the watermelon... became dirty fireworks...

“... I-I was a quest-class bomb user...?”

While my mouth began running in my confusion, Kikyouin-san wandered over to me. Looking over my watermelon-covered form, she spoke in monotone.

“Oh no, this is a disaster. It looks like that watermelon was an exploding

watermelon."

"E-exploding watermelon...? You're telling me such a weapon-like fruit exists?"

"Course it does. I'm sure it's from the country one over."

"Y-yeah..."

Come to think of it, maybe I saw it on the news. Something about grown hormones and expansion... apparently, the watermelon we used for melon smashing was an exploding watermelon. What terrible luck.

"Hey, Kurisu, is it alright?"

Finished dealing with me, Kikyouin-san called over to Kurisuchan. She was sullenly embracing the stick I used for the melon.

"Urgh... m-my staff... it reeks of watermelon....."

Well, like that, the melon smashing ended as a failure.

For dinner, we all surrounded a hot pot.

In the guest house's first-floor tatami dining room, atop the portable gas stove on the square table, the pot simmered and seethed.

At present, we were the only guests of Guesthouse Sunflower; using the grand dining hall for large groups or large banquets with just the five of us was a bit of a lonely experience, but I decided not to mind it.

Once the pot was ready, it seemed that Orino-san's hot-pot shogun switch was flipped as, "Kagurai-senpai, quit hogging the meat, and eat some vegetables as well."

"Mmm..."

"Kurisuchan, how about some mushrooms too? They're tasty."

"Urgh... I-I mean, they're all mushy and stringy."

"Kikyouin-san, don't use your chopsticks on raw meat. You'll get a stomach ache again."

"Kuh... you stab where it hurts."

Thanks to her direction of everyone's hotpot needs, we were able to have a tasty meal.

The hot-pot shogun generally takes on a negative connotation, but in actuality, with hotpots, yakiniku, okonomiyaki, and other foods everyone eats together,

it's actually a lot easier with someone properly directing.

“By the way, Kikyouin-san.”

Where did she fit all that meat into her slender body... Kagurai-senpai's momentum forced me to ponder as she abruptly raised her voice.

“It's been bothering me for a while now...”

“What.”

“How long are you going to wear those sunglasses?”

Oh, someone finally brought it up.

Truthfully, it had been bothering me for a while now. “Someone's going to point it out, surely,” I thought and ignored it, but as no one said anything, I had completely lost the right time.

I was sure we were going in the ‘let it slide’ direction, but as expected of Kagurai-senpai, the dignified authority on not reading the mood. She'll shove in a retort at any time.

“D-does it really matter!? I'm free to do what I want!”

“Hmm.”

As Kikyouin-san panicked, Kagurai-senpai formed a malicious smile, “Aaah!” she cried out, pointing into the distance.

The moment everyone's attention was directed that way—she made her move. Circling behind Kikyouin-san's opening-ridden body, she stuck her arms into her pits, and got her into a nelson hold.

“Hey! What are you doin', Kagurai! Let go of me! Seriously, let go!”

Kikyouin-san squirmed and kicked, but the hand of evil wouldn't let her escape.

‘Kagoshima, now!’

Kagurai-senpai's eyes flashed at me.

‘Roger!’

I immediately returned the eye contact and sprung into action. Perhaps it's sad that our first coordinated effort as president and vice president of the ComClub was this malicious. I got the feeling Kikyouin-san was going to

be pissed later, but let's just go with the flow. At these sort of drunk circles (though no one's drinking), most things are permitted. I smoothly snatched away Kikyouin-san's sunglasses.

“.....”

For a few seconds, silence ruled the space.

“... P-pfff.”

Another few seconds and snickers leaked from Orino-san and Kurisuchan, who had taken on the peanut gallery position of, “We’re not going to stop you, but we don’t support your actions.”

“Ahahahah! As I thought! You got reverse pandified!”

Circling to the front of the pinned Kikyouin-san, Kagurai-senpai laughed loudly without restraint.



“Gu...h.”

Kikyouin-san grit her teeth, covering up her reverse-pandified eyes. With just

how beautifully pale her skin was originally, the white around her eyes really stood out.

“Hahahahah. It’s because you tried to act cool wearing something like sunglasses. Ahahahahah.”

“I-I mean... I never thought I’d tan this much...”

Her first time at the beach, it looks like she didn't know her own constitution was prone to suntan. And today, she had learned first-hand the scariness of ultraviolet radiation.

“K-Kagoshima-kun,” Orino-san tugged at my clothes.

“I feel bad for her if she laughs that much. Go stop Kagurai-senpai.”

“Orino-san... Mm, but you know, the way I see it, these sorts of things are best sent off with a laugh.”

“Oh.....? Really?”

“Yeah. If we keep mindful of her, it’ll just make Kikyouin-san conversely mindful of us. Just writing it off with a laugh is best, surely.”

“... Sure enough, I do get that feeling...”

“Right? So laugh with all you’ve got, and make a good memory of it.”

“I see. Yeah, you’re right.”

Orino-san and I pointed at Kikyouin-san simultaneously,

No, I mean, it was funny.

Telling me not to laugh? No way, no way.

What's more, her sunglasses were in that dragonfly shape so the white spread a considerable radius. It was super intriguing.

" " 1111

The reverse panda's face went bright red as she silently started to shake.
Ah, this is bad.

It's about time she snapped.

I'm constantly getting her to snap day by day, so I can tell. Just as I thought at the very least I could evacuate myself to a safe area,

“L-like you’re any better!”

The reverse panda pointed at the loudly laughing Kagurai-senpai and shouted.

While her face was bright red, a sinister flame blazed in her eyes.

“I’m not the one who brought along a box of condoms!”

“Bbfffh! H-hac ha. H-hey, wai, wha wha...”

At the unexpected counterattack, Kagurai-senpai gave a grand choke.

“You even distributed them to all the girls!”

“G-guh....”

“To hell with, ‘A woman’s got to protect her own body’! You seriously creeped me out! You tried to act like a senpai and slipped and fell, you pervert!”

“I-I mean, girl... the summer ocean is full of danger. If any mistakes were made with a summer’s love, there’s no going back...”

“Not happenin’! Your knowledge is just inclined in a crazy direction!”

“In the games I play, when it comes to the sea, in most cases, i-it gets to that! Outside no less! In the shadow of the rocks!”

“Then you’re playing the wrong games!”

“Guh... a-anyways, Kikyouin-san. That talk was supposed to be over with yesterday... I said it, didn’t I? ‘You definitely can’t let Kagoshima know’ I said.”

“Hmph! No clue what you’re talking about.”

An interesting reversal of attack and defence.

A triumphant Kikyouin-san, and a bitter Kagurai-senpai.

It looks like where I wasn’t looking... meaning in the girls’ room, there was a bit of a controversy last night. No, how should I say it, yeah?

Girls have it hard.

“... Hm. You say that, Kikyouin, but you still took it!”

“Wha! Wron-! That’s... how am I even supposed to return that?”

“... And let’s not stop there!”

After laying Kikyouin-san with a stroke of the sword, Kagurai-senpai slowly turned her head around, towards Orino-san and Kurisuchan.

“In the end, each and every one of you took it!”

At that unforeseen spark, Orino-san and Kurisuchan choked.

... But they really were having fun in that other room.

When I fell right asleep.

“K-k-Kagurai-senpai and Kikyouin-sanpai. Please don’t drag us into your fight...”

“Kuuurriiiisssuuuu.”

Reverse-panda Kikyouin-san creased the pure-white area around her eyes to form an ill-spirited smile.

“Come to think of it, yesterday night, you were doing some strange exercises in the bathroom. I saw it by chance, see. Those were definitely exercises to enlarge your chest!”

“W-w-why are you exposing that!?”

Her efforts to overcome her complex over her body disclosed, Kurisuchan cried out.

“U-urk... you’re terrible, Kikyouin-senpai.”

“Hmph. It’s your fault for doing something like that at the training camp.”

“I mean, it takes three days to recover from one day spent slacking off, it said in the book...”

“No, then the book got it wrong.”

“B-but! I don’t want to hear it from you alone!”

Was Kurisuchan really going on the counteroffensive?

At that unexpected development, Kikyouin-san was slightly taken aback.

“Orino-senpai and Kagurai-senpai are a different story, but if one had to say, Kikyouin-senpai, you’re on the smaller side! You’re with me! We’re comrades!”

“Hah!? Don’t group me with you! We’re in no ways alike!”

“We’re together on the spectrum.”

“Don’t spectrum me!”

“If I’m going to get half-baked breasts like you, I’d rather stay small!”

“H-half-baked!?”

“I’ll have to start calling you Ms Mediocre.”

“Guhah! What a humiliating ring!”

“... Mn? Huh... in the first place, doesn’t the fact you could tell I was doing

breast enlargement exercises from just a glance mean you did something similar..."

"AaaaAAaaaah! Silence! Quiet, quiet!"

Oh pitiful Kikyouin-san, who picked a fight with her junior and got shot down.

"Kagoshima-kun..."

Orino-san called out to me softly and whispered in my ear.

"I-I'm going to run away while I can, can you let me through... at this rate,"

"You're not getting away, Orinooo."

As Orino-sensed the danger and tried to flee, her angles were grasped by a firm and dark shadow.

"I won't let you be the only one to get out unscathed..."

Clad in a muddy black aura, Kagurai-senpai had become the crawling chaos Nyarlathotep of Cthulhu mythology.

Her eyes said this.

We all die together.

"E-eeep."

"Orinoo. Backtracking a bit, you haaappily accepted the condom I brought, didn't you?"

"Urgh... b-but everyone accepted it... I'm not the odd one out."

"Yes, you're right about that. But you are the only one who secretly came to me later with questions on how to use it!"

"—! K-Kagurai-senpai, that was a secret..."

"These things have a front and back, right? How are you supposed to tell."

"Eck."

"Umm... w-when you put this on... i-i-is it better to do it with your mouth?"

"Erk."

"S-so anyways... umm, when I was playing around with it, the bag broke, so if possible, could you give me another?' Just how interested are you, you closet pervert!"

"Urrrrgh! A-acting so high and mighty, Kagurai-senpai, you couldn't even answer a single one of my questions! When you're usually playing all those strange games, you haven't learned anything practical!"

“S-say that again! I dare you!”

... Well, like that.

The four girls cut at each other only to be cut down themselves, an ugly bout of offence and defence unfolded.

Generally speaking, everyone here is a good kid. So none of them were used to showing contempt. That was precisely why whenever they tried to attack, they would dig their own grave.

Unable to beat down their opponent from a safety zone, they were constantly taking swipes with a double-edged sword.

What's more, each and every blow bore outrageous damage.

Watching over the strife from a little away, I could only make a dry smile.

“.....”

But—my heart felt just a little warm.

They really are all getting along.

What was flying around for a while now wasn't backbiting, it was insults.

Being able to trade insults is proof you know the other person well, and proof that you trust them. This was a gathering of exceptionally busy people, so we rarely ever did anything together... even so, like this, bit by bit, it looks like our bonds are deepening.

They really look like they're having fun. Making noise with friends like the sort of high school girl you could find anywhere.

With such a truly serene heart, I stood from my seat at ease—

“You ain't gonna tie this up with a pretty bow!”

I couldn't stand.

The second I tried, Kikyouin-san pulled the cushion from under my feet, sending me into a brilliant tumble. Something grabbed my feet from behind, dragging me kicking and screaming into the centre of the battlefield.

... Girls are scary.

After using the communal bath, dressing in a Yukata and returning to my room, my fatigue hit me like a truck.

“M-my legs are, crap...”

Laying out a futon, I threw myself right down. Enervation was starting to come out all over my body, it was especially terrible around my legs. My calves and thighs were screaming out.

I'm paying the price for my usual lack of exercise, definitely.

I somehow managed to put on a bluff in front of everyone, but I was at my limit.

"Rather, it's that... those four have way too much energy."

It's not like we're part of a sports club, but everyone is way too amazing.

"Heeey."

As I lay out over the futon, a voice came from beyond the sliding screen.

"Kagoshima. Can I come in?"

It was Kagurai-senpai. After sitting myself up, "Go ahead," I permitted her entry.

A little time lapsed and the screen slowly slid open.

"What's wrong? Didn't the girls head for the bath?"

Guesthouse Sunflower was a small place, and there wasn't a separate bath for men and women. It was on a system where it changed between a men's bath or a women's bath over time.

Despite that, it was an open air bath so I don't really get it, but putting that aside; when I got out, I was sure I passed by the girls.

"I got out early. The others are still inside."

Fresh out of the bath, Kagurai-senpai was in a yukata. Just like mine, it was the simple one provided in the room, but when she wore it, the piece looked strangely stylish.

To put it cordially, 'bewitching', and to put it low brow, 'kinda sexy'.

"Even so, it's not like you to properly ask before entering a room. For a moment there, I didn't know who it was."

When I spouted some cynicism, "Ah, y-yeah..." she returned an inarticulate answer.

"I've got a lot on my mind too..."

She said softly, her eyes wandering here and there.

“I thought there’d be trouble... if I caught you... tinkering with your hard drive.”

“Who’s tinkering, idiot!”

I retorted so hard I broke character.

Just what was this senpai saying with that red face!?

Ah, I see. So that’s why there was a bit of time between my, “Go ahead” and her entry!

“I-I mean... today you burned our swimsuited bodies amply into your eyes, right? What’s more, the girls are in the bath. When all that’s going on, if the man’s alone in his room, I thought he might get excited, so I showed some consideration...”

“I don’t need that consideration!”

“In the games I play, when the man is going at it alone in his room, the girl generally spots him... and from there, bit by bit...”

“That’s a game, ain’t it!”

Good grief. The troubling part is how instead of playing dumb, she actually sounds relatively serious. It’s not like Kagurai-senpai tells dirty jokes to tease, her oversensitive response to vulgar topics just ends up as a dirty joke. I don’t think she was like this when we first met, but... just what could have turned her into a person so susceptible to them?

Hmm...

I’ve got no clue.

“So in the end, what did you come for?”

In that awkward air, I spoke somewhat tiredly.

“Ah, right, right. Right. That’s right... i-it’s not like I came here to see you transfer software into hardware, you hear!”

“I know!”

When I was trying to move on from that already! When I thought I had made perfect use of the single syllable, ‘So’ the most appropriate word to change a

topic!

“I thought I’d discuss tomorrow’s plans with you again.”

“Tomorrow...”

The ComClub’s training camp was planned for three nights, four days. The first day, or rather the zeroeth day ended just with reaching our lodging, and on the last day, we planned to leave as soon as we ate breakfast.

So today and tomorrow were the only days we could have any real activities.

Today was practically over already... that left tomorrow.

Today—meaning the first day only had, ‘play at the beach’ planned, but two consecutive beach days would be harsh. So we needed to polish up a plan.

“Right, then let’s go over it again. We’re vice president and president, for argument’s sake.”

“What do you mean, argument’s sake, huh?”

Prodded a bit by Kagurai-senpai, I took the map and memo pad from my back. Kagurai-senpai and I kneaded the plan for tomorrow. The bus and commute times to get to nearby sightseeing spots, we had already completed various preliminary evaluations.

“Yeaah. Don’t you think we should buy a few more fireworks?”

“I think we have enough, but if you insist, I’ll find a time to slip out and buy them tomorrow.”

Like that, the two of us held a meeting.

At first, the meeting was held as a final check, but as we talked, improvements and changes began to surface. Not like that, not like this, in the midst of our conversation, Kagurai-senpai returned to her room and came back with her personal laptop. Unlike my analogue ways, Kagurai-senpai stored all her notes digitally.

“Huh? Isn’t that Gakuta-kun...”

The PC was connected to Gakuta-kun. Various cables extending from it pierced into the stuffed animal’s back.

“He wasn’t attached to your phone, so I was sure you left him behind, but you brought him after all.”

She really can never let go of her dolls, how heartwarming, I mused as Kagurai-senpai placed the computer and Gakuta-kun on the table, “No,” she shook her head.

“Gakuta’s keeping house. His personality data’s been extracted, so this is just an empty shell.”

She said something I didn’t really get.

I wonder if that meant she didn’t feel like doing ventriloquism this time.

“Thanks to a certain someone, Gakuta’s body was smashed up the other day. It’s currently being repaired.”

“Guh...”

That certain someone was me, so I shut my mouth.

I didn’t get why a computer was necessary to repair a stuffed animal, but I’m sure that had to do with the complex setting Kagurai-senpai had in her head.

“I wanted to finish repairs before training camp began. But thanks to ComClub activities, I couldn’t find the time.”

“ComClub activities...? A-ah, I see.”

Come to think of it, we were the Computer Club.

I’d completely forgotten. When we were gathering members, she said, “I’ll take care of all the ComClub duties on my own,” and true to her words, it looks like she was properly carrying them out.

“But specifically speaking, what do the ComClub’s activities entail?”

“What? I just normally write up programs and submit them to student-oriented events and contests. As long as I get proper results, I don’t get any complaints from the school’s side.”

“Hmm.”

“But when I made an artificial intelligence and sent it in the other day, there was a bit of a ruckus.”

“... Senpai, you can program AI?”

I’m not bright in that field, so I don’t really know, but was an AI something a single high schooler could make?

“I managed to switch it out for something else before the ruckus grew into

anything big, but... that 'AMLO' was a satisfying build. Even without a human giving orders, it'll arbitrarily read their thoughts and autonomously take action, the assistant robot of dreams... Hrm. It's not easy to purposely lower your level."

"....."

I felt like I was hearing about a different world and, "Anyways, moving on, moving on," Kagurai-senpai changed the topic as if it was nothing at all, gazing at her computer screen as she exchanged words. At times, Gakuta-kun's bodies would let off a bright flash, in the corner of the screen, "Repair Rate 72%. Damage detected in abdominal storage medium," the message displayed, but I decided not to pay it any mind.

Just like that, about twenty minutes passed by, and as the talks were finally getting together,

"... It sure is fun."

Softly.

Kagurai-senpai said it as if talking to herself.

"Fun. It really is fun."

"What are you saying, all of a sudden?"

"What's this, Kagoshima. You're not having fun?"

"No, of course, I'm having fun too."

But when she said that so suddenly, I didn't know how to respond.

"Today really was fun. Making a ruckus at the beach with everyone, picking at a hot pot, laughing over stupid things, arguing over even stupider things... it was all a first for me."

"Is that so...?"

"Yeah."

With a nod, and a small laugh.

But for some reason her smile... looked far too lonely.

"I've really taken a liking to these members."

"....."

"Orino's an oppai, Kurisu's a loli, Kikyouin's a tsundere, and Kagoshima's an idiot."

“Oy.”

Another character-breaking retort.

No, but still, that was something appropriate to retort.

She was in danger of blowing away the sorrowful air right there.

“... What’s wrong, Kagurai-senpai? The training camp isn’t over yet. You should save that heart-to-heart air for the last night.”

“Haha. You’re right, my bad... it’s just, when I think of how we’ll have to part eventually, I get quite the lonesome feeling.”

“Eh? W-what do you mean part?”

“Well of course we’ll part. I’m a third year, you know? I’m going to graduate earlier than the rest of you.”

“A-ah, so that’s what you meant...”

That was a surprise. Since she suddenly came out with ‘parting,’ I wondered what she was talking about.

“There’s still a way to go before graduation...”

I said.

I couldn’t stand to see her, looking a few sizes smaller than usual.

“And, I-look. It’s not like graduation means a lifetime parting. We have email and twitter these days, so we can get in contact as much as we want, and if we ever want to meet, it’ll work itself out...”

Kagurai-senpai... didn’t say anything. She closed her eyes, and linked her lips in a straight line.

The silence seeping into the room threw my heart into disarray.

Sad, and miserable, and tantalized to boot.

Why is it so, Kagurai-senpai?

Why are you showing such a weak form to me so suddenly...

“Yeah!”

As I stayed without a word, Kagurai-senpai forcefully stood and hit her hands together.

“Forget what I just said. That was my bad. Got a little sentimental there, don’t worry about it!”

“...Kagurai-senpai.”

“Now then, the others should be out of the bath by now. I’m returning to the room. When the girls are done drying their hair, I’ll come get you again. Let’s all go get some ice cream together.”

Severing her energetic voice, she turned her back to me and walked off. With her taking on such a clear attitude of rejection, I couldn’t pursue it any further.

After that, we spent our time eating ice cream and playing cards. Before we went to sleep, Kurisuchan clung to me in tears, “Oh noooo! The rhinoceros beetles are swarming around my staff! Kagoshima-senpai, please get them off! W-whoah! Lots of bugs I’ve never seen before!” and we had a bit of a tussle, but, well, it wasn’t much.

I returned to my room, and by the time I got under the covers, it was around eleven.

We still had tomorrow, I can’t stay awake forever.

The girls got up early today morning, so I’m sure they’ll sleep soon without much pay.

“It was a fun day.”

I muttered earnestly under the covers.

From the depths of my heart, I was glad I came. I had to give my thanks to Tsuchimikado.

It looked like everyone was satisfied, and at present, the training camp was a huge success.

It’s just...

“...Kagurai-senpai.”

She was still on my mind.

Graduation.

The word remained in a corner of my mind.

Pitiful as it may be, up until this very day, I had completely forgotten the fact that Kagurai-senpai would graduate before us... no rather than forgot, it never hit me.

That was because she didn’t behave very senpai-ish (rude of a thought as it is),

but also perhaps because I myself never wanted to consider we might part someday.

There's nothing in this world that never changes.

So we will change, and following along, our place and relation will change as well.

Time passes by.

We can't remain high schoolers forever.

We'll have... to graduate.

Reality was never 'Sazae-san' or 'Kochikame'.

It was always 'Lucky☆Star' and 'K-On!'.

Without repeating the same days forever, we must mature and grow with the years.

But... the desire to stay this way forever exists after all.

The fear of change.

It surely finds a place in everyone's heart.

"....."

As I drowsily thought over such notions, my consciousness slipped into darkness. The first day of training camp was over.

Chapter 2: From the Future

1st Loop

The first morning of training camp.
I woke to the ruckus from outside the room.

“Mn... what?”

I could hear what sounded like an argument from beyond the screen. While I couldn't pick up the contents, the voices belonged to the girls I knew.
Did something happen in the girls' room?

When I got my appearance in order and walked out, there was Kurisuchan standing in the hall.

“Ah, Kagoshima-senpai, good morning. You're right on time, I was just about to get you...”

“Good morning. Hey, it's kinda noisy. Did something happen?”

“That's, umm... Kagurai-senpai suddenly said something strange.”

“Senpai said something strange?”

I analyzed that fact with a level head and spoke.

“What's strange about that?”

That's nothing new. It's a daily occurrence.

“Eeh!? Ah, no... that may be true, but a-anyways, come with me.”

Kurisuchan pulled me by the hand towards the girls' room. A short walk down the wood-panel flooring, and we reached in no time. The girls' room was a Japanese-styles space several times larger than mine. The futons were already folded up and stacked in a corner of the room. The two in the centre noticed me and turned.

“Kagoshima... just the person I was looking for. Listen to this, Orino and Kurisu are going crazy.”

“You're the one saying crazy things, Kagurai-senpai.”

They were making troubled faces, the both of them.

Kagurai-senpai took a step forward and placed a hand on both my shoulders.

“Kagoshima. Today is the second day of training camp, right?”

Hers was a pleading voice.

I blankly tilted my head.

“What are you talking about? Today is the first day.”

We spent all of yesterday getting to the guesthouse, so we agreed not to count it... it was the zeroeth day. So today was the first day of training camp.

“W-what are you saying, Kagoshima... yesterday, we all played on the beach, right?”

“? I have to ask you again, what are you talking about? The beach play starts now, doesn’t it? I thought the plan was to spend all of the first day playing by the sea.”

“... We played beach volleyball together, we swam, we smashed melons. When your turn came around, the watermelon blew into smithereens when you hit it.”

“No, why would a watermelon explode when I hit it? I’m not the Bomber.”

“Why did your parody advance from the era of Yu☆Yu☆Hakusho to HunterXHunter... never mind, but that can’t be...”

The gears weren’t meshing to such an extent I’d say they were completely disengaged.

“... What’s wrong, Kagurai-senpai? Do you have a fever?”

“That’s my line... why have all of you forgotten about yesterday...? Kikyouin was reverse pandaified... r-right, Kikyouin! Where’s Kikyouin!?”

“... Kagurai-senpai, seriously, are you feeling alright?”

I grew sincerely worried.

Perhaps she came down with a summer cold.

Maybe her hazy conscious was causing her to speak of events from a dream.

“Kikyouin-san had urgent business to attend to, so she couldn’t come. She gave us a call, didn’t she?”

I simply stated the obvious—common knowledge.

“... Eh? Wha, hah?”

And yet, Kagurai-senpai widened her eyes in a daze.

“It really was a shame for Kikyouin-san. She was really excited about it.”

“Yeah. Looked like she was trying to hide her enthusiasm, but it was obvious.”

When Kurisuchan and Orino-san exchanged words, Kagurai-senpai held her head.

“T-the lot of you are working together to pull a fast one on me... getting back at me for that wake up surprise I pulled on you yesterday...?”

“What’s up with you... ah. Hey, Kagurai-senpai, take a look at this.”

I showed her my cell phone screen. That was more proof than anything that this was the first day of camp. The date displayed in the center—there was no doubt about it.

“—!”

Kagurai-senpai snatched the phone quicker than a pickpocket and gazed entranced into it.

“Oy, Kagoshima... no matter the case, you’re putting too much into it. You’d go as far as to change your phone settings to surprise me...”

“You’re wrong. In the first place, I don’t even know how to fiddle with the date on this phone...”

After returning my phone, Kagurai-senpai confirmed the date on her own phone. Her complexion that was bad to begin with took a turn for the worse.

“No, way...”

Quietly.

The phone in her hand fell onto the tatami.

The date displayed on it—it went without saying, was the same as mine.

“What’s going on here...?”

“Category is... things that begin with ‘dr’.”

“Eeh? Isn’t that a hard one?”

“Don’t worry, there are plenty of them. Here we go, Orino-san.”

The summer beached shined on mercilessly by the sun. Having gotten somewhat tired of beach volleyball, Orino-san, Kurisuchan and I started mixing something like Concentration 64 into the game.

At present, Orino-san and I were competing, while Kurisuchan was the ref.

“Then I’ll start. Drawing.”

“Dragon Ball.”

We said a word that fit the topic before tossing the ball back to the other.

“Dragon Quest.”

“Dried Apricot.”

“Drunkard.”

“Drum,”

“Dragoon.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“One of the four sacred beasts in Beyblade.”

“... Well I guess it works. Drugstore.”

“Dranzer.”

“What’s that!?”

“One of the four sacred beasts in Beyblade.”

“Ahain!? Umm, Drive.”

“Driger, one of the four sa... etc.”

“...Draft meeting”

“Draciel, one... etc.”

“... Fufu, I saw it coming. Drucker! Now, it’s four sacred beasts, so that’s the end of that! The real match starts here!”

“Dragoon GA.”

“..... Like hell I can win this!”

Unable was unable to say a word in the category, what’s more, she snapped and spiked the ball.

It was my complete victory. You could say it was a strategic win.

“Fu fu fu. The moment you permitted the ‘Things that start with dr’ category, your defeat was set in stone.”

Beyblade’s four sacred beasts still have the S Series, the F Series, the V Series, the G Series, the MS Series, there was plenty more where they came from! I grew triumphant, “In battle, the ending is decided before...” I started out, but Orino-san ignored that and walked over to Kurisuchan.

“Ref! That one was a foul, right!?”

“Pipiiii. Kagoshima Red Card. You’re out of the game.”

“W-what!?”

“It’s against the rules to bring up fictional jargon the other player does not know. Otherwise, you could just make up anything.”

Hearing that wholly sound opinion, I had no words to return.

Hmph. The world shall always prosecute the strong.

“Then since Kagoshima-senpai lost by foul, he’s going to swap out with me.”

I rotated with Kurisuchan, this time I was the referee... which was really just the next in line position. There were only three of us, it was inevitable that it came to this.

If we had one more, we would be able to go two on two, but—

“.....”

Ever since that, Kagurai-senpai shut herself up in her room.

“You should go play on the beach. I want to be alone for a while,” she said, and we reluctantly did so. I’m still worried. I thought, as I looked at the guesthouse and spotted Kagurai-senpai. She was trudging her way on the path towards the house.

I hurriedly raced over to her.

“Kagurai-senpai, where did you go? I thought you’d be holed up in your room the whole time.”

“... I went around asking. I asked every person I passed, ‘What day is today?’.” Her voice was feeble. Just listening to it aroused unease in me.

“I thought I’d make it clear who was crazy, me or you.”

A self-deprecating smile. As if smiling was all she had left to do.

“I started with the guesthouse’s owner. He answered with what I considered yesterday’s date. I walked a long way, I asked an old man taking a walk, and the clerk at the convenient store—it was all no good. It’s clear now.”

“.....”

“It does seem the crazy one is me.”

“... What are you, talking about?”

I couldn’t comprehend the meaning behind her words.
I couldn’t... comprehend.

“It’s nothing. Forget about it.”

Kagurai-senpai lightly shook her head.

“Hey, Kagoshima. We’re staying here thanks to the arrangement of an onmyouji Kikyouin-san is acquainted with, Tsuchimikado, right?”

“That’s right...”

“Hmm. So that part hasn’t changed. In that case, have you heard anything about the ghost that Tsuchimikado fellow exorcised?”

“Who knows? If you want to know that, shouldn’t you call Kikyouin-san? You have her number, right?”

“I already tried. But it won’t connect. The person you are trying to reach has either run out of battery or is in a place without cell phone reception.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“I can only hope it really is reception or battery.”

Kagurai-senpai said somewhat offhandedly.

“Kagoshima. There’s a little something I have to do. You all should keep playing. Once I’ve finished up, I’ll join you.”

She said and turned her back to me.

“... Considering how Kikyouin isn’t here, this might be a youkai, or something of the sort... is Kikyouin currently fighting somewhere... but why am I the only one... if I can use the internet...” she mumbled to herself as she entered the

guesthouse.

She told me to play, but Kagurai-senpai was still bothering me. After giving notice to Orino-san and Kurisuchan playing on the beach, I went back inside.

“Oh. If you’re looking for the tall lassy, she returned to her room.”

Was the response I got when I asked the guesthouse owner in the entranceway.

A splendid physique, with gentle facial features as if the goodness of his character was seeping in. An apron with the name of the place. Guesthouse Sunflower was managed by this uncle on his own, it seems.

“Is that so. Thank you very much.”

“Is something up? That kid was making quite a cornered face.”

“... That’s what I’d like to know.”

Separating from the owner, I headed for the girls’ room on the second floor. As I stood before the screen door, about to call out and ask if it was alright I went in... it was at that moment.

“Dive In B3 World! Code KAGURAI Access!”

From inside, I heard a dignified cry.

This is that. The sweet-dreams charm Kagurai-senpai occasionally says with her troublesome habit of taking naps regardless of time or place. I came to see her out of worry, but it seems she was going to enter her midday naptime. In that case, I shouldn’t get in her way.

I thought, as I quietly tried to leave, but,

“—Huh! Wh... at?”

Another voice from inside.

“W-what is the meaning of this...?”

“Kagurai-senpai, is something wrong?”

I curiously opened the screen.

There, gripping her cellphone, facing the laptop on the table, was Kagurai-senpai.

“... K-Kagoshima, I-I’m in trouble...”

She turned to me with an anxious face, she spoke in a shaking voice.

“I can’t enter my computer...”

At the time, just what sort of expression did I make?
I can’t tell my own expression, but... I could feel a tear touch my cheek.

“W-why... there shouldn’t be any problems with the voice recognition or nanomachines... any yet why, why can’t I go in...?”

“Kagurai-senpai... U-uu..... uwaaaah.....”

Unable to stand any longer, I crumbled to the tatami. The tears from my cheeks seeped into the seams.

“Humans can’t enter PCs...”

How could this be...

Before I realized it, Kagurai-senpai’s heart was afflicted to such a degree. Entering the computer, entering the game, humans who say that are already done for. At the end of the line.

“No, Kagoshima... it’s, um, that. W-when I said enter the computer... it was a figure of speech...”

“... It’s fine. You don’t have to say anything...”

What have I even been doing?

With such an unfortunate person in close proximity, I overlooked her without doing a thing?

The rage towards my own negligence and my sympathy for her converted to tears that gushed with no end.

Ah... what was I doing!?

“Kagoshima..... ah, that can wait. Now’s not the time for that.”

Kagurai-senpai said gloomily, as she ignored my lament and looked at the screen anew.

“Dive In B3 World! Code KAGURAI Access!”

An expression at her wit's end, she chanted her sweet-dreams charm again. But she didn't fall asleep.

"Dive In B8 World... D-Dive In B3 Wor... it's no good. Dammit. Why..."

She desperately retreated her charm.

Kagurai-senpai was desperate. She grew desperate as she turned to the computer screen and continued crying out.

.....

This is... an obsession.

An eccentric's obsession.

Kagurai-senpai's finally gone off to a world I don't know.

".....! Kagurai-senpai!"

By the time I noticed it, I had leapt out and embraced her from behind with all my might.

"Please come back, Kagurai-senpai! Humans... humans can't go inside of computers!"

"Wha!? What are you doing!? L-let go!"

"I won't! ... Kagurai-senpai... no matter how, no matter how hard it may be, we've got no choice but to live in the world we have. The game world is definitely wonderful. If you're tired of faring the stormy seas of reality, then it's necessary to soak in the tepid bath called games from time to time... but! That's all it is!"

I grew more heated than ever before. But there was no way I couldn't be so. If it's now, there might still be a chance for Kagurai-senpai to start over! My blazing soul and young passion kept me going!

"You can't stay submerged in that fictional world forever! If you stay there, you might be able to go on without feeling pain. You might not have to bear injury... but what's so bad about getting hurt!?"

"....."

"We all hurt one another, and that's how we grow! There are things you can't see without a little pain! Even so... even so, if you're scared of being hurt, I'll take on the blows with you. Please let me suffer injury with you!"

"....."

Slowly and calmly slipping out of my hug, Kagurai-senpai made a dubious expression words failed me on. When I was saying something super good, for some reason her eyes were cold. “This guy really is a pain,” sort of eyes. I feel an insurmountable difference in temperature here. As much difference between Kacrackle and Kafrizzle. Like a Frizz Cracker was about to be born between us.

(TL: These are all spells from Dragon Quest, the strongest from the Crack(ice) and Frizz(fire) families. Frizz Cracker is a link spell between the two.)

“Yaaaaah, Kagoshima. I’ll admit saying enter a computer might sound like a cringy statement to someone of this era...”
“Cringy? Don’t use that word to run away, Kagurai-senpai! You have to properly face yourself! That cringe is a part of you!”
“... A-anyways, even if it’s impossible in this era, perhaps something like that will be possible in the future...”
“...! To hell with the future, you damn fool!”

Thwap.

I let out a slap.

I poured in my fighting spirit.

“H-hah!?”

Falling to the floor, Kagurai-senpai looked at me with, is this guy alright in the head, sort of eyes.

“Someone not living in the present has no qualifications to speak of the future!”

While I put on the face of a demon, I rubbed my hand aching from the slap as I cried out.

... Ah, by the way, no matter how I steeled my heart, I wouldn’t hit a woman. I used my right hand to hit my left, a common play-slap.

Therefore, the damage she received was far less than Sakuragi Hanamichi’s ‘This is for Rukawa’ slap. I firmly grasped Kagurai-senpai’s shoulders, in my vision blurring from my welling years, I gazed straight into her eyes.

“... Don’t lose. Don’t lose to yourself... don’t lose to reality...”

Shaking her body back and forth, I pleaded to her in a weeping voice.

Do your best.

You have to do your best, Kagurai Monyumi.

If you run away from reality, it's over.

“... Wipe your tears, Kagoshima.”

With her shoulders grabbed, she stopped moving entirely.

Kagurai-senpai slowly stood and looked down on me with warm eyes.

“Good grief, you can be surprisingly heated from time to time... Well, thank you. I get how much you must think of me.”

“Kagurai-senpai...”

That's good. Looks like these heated feelings of mine—

“But honestly, you're quite a pain!”

— Did not get through.

Nimbly circling behind me, Kagurai-senpai entangled my neck and arm, putting me into a solid headlock. My neck groaned as she tightened down on it.

“When the situation's as troublesome and incomprehensible as it is, don't make this anymore complicated, Kagoshimaaa!”

“Ugyaaaah!”

She resorted to violence. Drat, this is what's wrong with this generation. Say something just a bit harsh and they snap!

... Certainly, I got the feeling I was being a considerable pain, but even so, a headlock is too much...

No matter, Kagurai-senpai still has a way to go! A headlock from a woman comes with the reward of a soft sensation on the head—

“H-huh!? It's not there! I can't feel any breast!”

This is strange.

Kagurai-senpai's not on Orino-san's level, but she's got a considerable chest.

“Fuhahaha. Naïve, far too naïve, Kagoshima! Did you think you'd be able to get a taste of the super-template inevitable lucky pervert with me!?”

Kuh, I see.

This person's a dating sim addict...

Breast touch from head lock, a development used in manga, anime, and games so often it's been used up, she's sure to have seen it enough times to grow tired of it.

So she studied a technique to not let my face touch anything soft and inflict only pain!?

"Kuuuh... i-it just hurts... there's no healing factor....."

I never knew.

A headlock without boob touch could be this painful...

[IMAGE]

"They're right before my eyes, but I can't touch, I can't feel... right, like the mirage of an oasis over the scorching desert sands..."

"No, don't make it sound so cool."

"Wai, senpai, I give. Give, give. Give and take!"

"And what do you have to offer me?"

"I made a mistake. I give up. Either undo this headlock or let me touch your breasts."

"Those are my options!?"

"... Fufufu. Fuahahah. Let me warn you, Kagurai-senpai. It's in your best interest to undo this headlock with all due haste."

"Muh. You suddenly sound confident."

"Don't blame me for what happens if you don't take it off. I won't do you ill, just undo it this instant. Or else..."

"Hmm. How interesting. And what do you think you can do in this situation?"

"... I can start feeling good."

"Say what!?"

"Now, now! If you don't hurry up, the masochist inside of me will awaken!"

"Kuh, t-to think you would threaten me in this situation..."

"... Gguuu. T-this is bad, my M, inside of me, the other me is opening his eyes."

"Don't make it sound like split personality."

"... Aaah! T-this exquisite instant where my consciousness drifts in and out is the greatest bliss! Hah hah, hah hah."

"Creep!"

Kagurai-senpai undid the headlock and thrust me away with all her might. Kuku. It looks like I was one step higher.

This is the sure-kill technique, if pushing doesn't work, try pulling back. Don't escape from the enemy's shackles, lead the enemy to undo them herself. My complete victory.

It a dangerous gamble where one wrong stem might actually awaken me to masochism, but I somehow managed—huh?

“... Eh?”

With the momentum of the thrust, I took a number of steps back, my leg catching on someone's bag along the way.

My body fell backwards with good force.

I didn't even have time to contemplate, ah, I'm screwed. A hard sensation on the back of my head. Did I hit one of the room's support pillars? Sparks scattered before my eyes.

Sparks flew but soon faded to darkness.

In my faint consciousness, “... K-Kagoshima? Eh? N-no way... you. Back there, you were completely playing along with the gag, right? No matter what injury you get, that was a scene where you should get off with a huge bump like in a manga, right? Oy, Kagoshima, Kagoshima!” I thought I heard a desperate scream.

2nd Loop

The first morning of training camp.

I awoke to someone calling my name.

“Kagoshima! Thank god, you're okay!”

My covers were pulled off, and I was strongly embraced.

“... E-eeh? Eeh?”

W-what's with this situation!?

I was still half asleep, so my head couldn't keep up with this sudden development. But for some reason, Kagurai-senpai was in the room, in pajamas, ignoring my dismay to hold my body tight.

“Thank god... yesterday you wouldn’t open your eyes even after night came, so I didn’t know what I would do... I’m sorry, because I pushed you away, you suffered such a heavy injury.”

“Eh? Yesterday? Did something happen yesterday?”

I think we just moved and slept yesterday.

“Rather than yesterday, it’s last time, I guess... anyways, I’m glad. I’m really, really glad...”

“... What happened? Did you hit your head or something?”

“That would be you, idiot...”

No, I didn’t hit anything.

I wondered if she was half asleep, but Kagurai-senpai’s tone so serious I hesitated to make the judgement. Her body was shaking as she embraced mine. She seemed relieved from the bottom of her heart. I couldn’t push her away.

“Next time I put you in a headlock, I’ll properly put my breasts against you!”

“Alright, she’s definitely half asleep!”

I swiftly pushed her away.

What is she saying so early in the morning?

She must’ve dreamt of dating sims or something.

“Ah, right, Kagoshima. Show me your head for a second.”

“Head? Well, I don’t mind.”

Kagurai-senpai circled around me and touched the back of my head.

“... There’s no trace of injury. The large bump that formed yesterday has cleanly vanished—no, it didn’t vanish, it never happened... which confirms that individual memories aren’t being falsified, the world itself is...”

After finishing a complete inspection on my head, Kagurai-senpai put a hand to her chin and began mumbling to herself.

“There was a possibility we looped once by complete coincidence, but now that we’re on a second one, it looks like this is the type that will keep looping again and again until we eliminate the ‘something’ that’s causing it... to think Kagoshima was saved thanks to it, how ironic...”

She said some incomprehensible things with a dubious face.
How long was she going to stay in dreamland?
For now, won't she leave my room? Even a man gets a bit embarrassed when someone witnesses his sleeping face.

"Kagoshima, today is the first day of training camp, right?"

"That's right."

"As I thought. Hmm... at this point, I have no choice but to accept the loop itself, and if I accept it... that leaves the questions of, 'why I alone am kept out of the loop without access to B3 World' and 'Why isn't Kikyouin here' those two points..."

I shrank back as Kagurai-senpai started thinking to herself again.

"Ah, so this is where you were."

Orino-san appeared.

While she was in her pajamas, unlike Kagurai-senpai whose hair was all ruffled as if she had jumped straight out of bed, she was looking proper.

"What happened, Kagurai-senpai? You made a straight dash out of the room the second you woke up..."

"Orino... no, um, well, you see..."

"And you even came to Kagoshima-kun's room..."

"Y-you're wrong, Orino! I haven't done any of the indecent things you're imagining!"

"H-hey! Please don't conclude that I'm thinking indecent things!"

"Yeah, we didn't do any indecent things, right Kagoshima?"

"No, you suddenly embraced me..."

"Read the goddam mood, dude!"

"E-embraced...? W-what are you two doing so early in the morning!?"

Orino-san's face went red, Kagurai-senpai held her head, and I was still dazed out, not fully awake.

Flip, flop, the sound of slippers in the hall.

"You're sure lively in the mornin', each and everyone one of you. Heaaah."

Taking over from the footsteps, a languid voice sounded out.

At that instant, Kagurai-senpai's body twitched.

“Good grief. Just because we’re on training camp, you’re getting’ way too worked up.”

“Wha...”

Seeing the girl whose head popped out from the screen, Kagurai-senpai’s eyes opened wide, she was at a loss for words. She had undone her trademark ponytail, and thanks to her hairstyle different from usual, I wondered who it was for a moment. But that was only the briefest of moments.

The one who appeared after Orino-san...w as Kikyouin-san.

“K-Kikyouin... why are you here...?”

Half surprised, half terrified, Kagurai-senpai spoke up. I got the feeling it was somewhat in bad taste to use this an expression for a self-proclaimed onmyouji, but Kagurai-senpai’s reaction as she looked at her was as if she had seen a ghost or monster. A reaction as if she had seen someone who shouldn’t be there.

“Hah? What, I’m not supposed to be?”

“I mean... you weren’t here yesterday...”

“Yesterday? No, I was. I rode the train all the way here with you.”

“Not that... last time... y-you weren’t off fighting somewhere... wasn’t this situation caused by a youkai or apparition or something on your side?”

“? How long are you gonna sleep talk? Wake up already.”

Kikyouin-san said with a light sigh.

“... Are you really Kikyouin? Kikyouin Yuzuki?”

As Kagurai-senpai said that with a dubious face, I cut in without hesitation.

“Something the matter? Just because her character’s gotten weaker without the ponytail, it’s rude to say something like that.”

“Wait a second. There’s someone here far ruder than Kagurai.”

“Kikyouin-san’s a stubborn one, but she’s really a delicate girl.”

“Oy, listen to people.”

“She’s the sort of girl who spots a puppy on a rainy day, but unable to honestly pick it up, she pretends to ignore it; it stays on her mind all the way, so she comes back, abruptly starts talking to herself, and leaves just her umbrella

behind.”

“What do you know about me!?”

A slipper thrown with all the basics of shoe-throwing down smacked me in the face.

Yeah, yeah, a relentless retort in regards to me.

This is undoubtedly Kikyouin.

“Did you get an eyeful of that, Kagurai-senpai? That snapping art is something only Kikyouin-san is capable of.”

“Snapping art!? You wanna die?”

Kikyouin-san snapped in such a way that if she really wanted me dead in her heart, the action would already have been taken care of, but Orino-san restrained her from behind and I didn’t become a casualty.

Within that boisterous air, Kagurai-senpai alone made a dark face.

While the three of us were completely joking around, she maintained a serious air.

Right, she wasn’t reading the mood.

She alone... was floating.

As if she was floating away from the world itself.

“Well, well, let’s calm down, Kikyouin-san.”

Orino-san stuck a hand into the blond hair from behind and bundled it together with accustomed hand motions.

“There we go. It’s your usual ponytail. See, now you’re a recognizable character.”

“You’re completely mockin’ me here! ‘n wait, what!? Just how much do you people see me as a ponytail character!? I don’t have any real attachment to it, you know!? It just gets in the way, so I clamp it together!”

“Ponytail... r-right! What about the twin one... what happened to twintails!?”

Kagurai-senpai recalled twin tails from ponytail.

What a terrible association game.

“Where’s twint—Kurisu?”

“... What are you talking about, Kagurai-senpai?”

Said I.

“Kurisuchan had urgent business to attend to, so she couldn’t come. She gave us a call, didn’t she?”

“T... this, again...”

Kagurai-senpai powerlessly fell into a slump on the spot.

“... No, way... it’s Kurisu this time... why...?”

She held her head as she mumbled weakly.

She looked dismayed, confused.

But what was dismayed her, what she was so confused about, I had no way of telling.

“Huh? Kikyouin-san. You took off your sunglasses?”

The scene changes to the summer beach.

We had played our hearts out, so at present, we were taking a breather on the vinyl sheet laid out under the parasol. cutting up the watermelon we received from the owner husband and wife, we split it between the three of us.

We did discuss trying to smash it, but it didn’t seem like it would be fun with just the three of us, so we just ate it normally.

“Yeah, Kagurai told me to, ‘take care not to be reverse pandaified,’ so I took them off just in case.”

“Hmm.”

“Well, there’s no way I would make such a stupid mistake.”

Kikyouin-san spoke with pride.

That line kinda sounded like the lead-in to a joke.

“I finished cutting the watermelon.”

Orino-san distributed the melon cut into thirds, we ate it together.

“Mn? Orino, what are you doin’?”

“Me? I’m just salting it.”

“Salt?”

Kikyouin-san’s eyebrow twitched.

“You just don’t get it. Put salt on it, and you’ll taint the flavor, right? If you can’t enjoy the natural taste of the ingredients, you’re still a kid.”

“... C-calling someone a kid for something like that makes you the real kid. This is all up to personal preference. And sprinkling salt draws out the flavor of the base ingredients even further.”

Orino-san became mildly irritated.

“Hmph. Watermelon should be enjoyed in its natural state. Even the great philosopher Sen no Rikyuu said that watermelon should be enjoyed as watermelon.”

“The reason Sen no Rikyuu got angry was because someone tried to add sugar, right? Salt is a separate story.”

“Salt, sugar, they’re all the same.”

The battle between the salty and the salt nots broke out.

These two fight over the most trivial things. I wonder if this is what it means to be close enough to fight.

“Hey, Kagoshima-kun—”

“you, what do you—”

As the two started quibbling incessantly, they turned to me in search of a third-party opinion.

“Ah, sorry. It’s nothing.”

“Nevermind.”

“Eeh!?”

The question was revoked before I even got time to answer.

“Why!? Weren’t you looking for a third-party opinion?”

“No, I mean, even if we ask you, it won’t get us anywhere...”

“Your answer won’t serve as reference for anything.”

How rude! You’re making it sound as if my sense of taste diverges from the

average person to a considerable degree!

“n wait, it’s not like you can tell the taste to begin with. Why don’t you try eatin’ this?”

Kikyouin-san said as she tossed her left-over watermelon skin at me. It seemed she still bore a grudge for the morning’s teasing, her expression was incredibly sadistic. With the malicious smile of a queen, she looked down on me.

“Chop chop. Now eat it already.”

“Well, if you’re giving it to me, I’ll happily take it.”

I retrieved the watermelon skin that had fallen on the sheet, and ate it. Yaaaah, it’s all juicy and delicious!

“Wait, you ate it!?”

Before my exceedingly normal meal, her queen smile crumbled instantly.

“Eh? You told me to eat it. It’s too late to get it back now.”

“No, no, eeh? Eeeeeeh?”

Kikyouin-san raised a somewhat shameful voice, while Orino-san pulled back a bit.

“Ah, could it be you two are from the side that don’t eat watermelon skin?”

“I didn’t know of the existence of the side that did...”

“Hmhmm. You were just quarrelling over whether to add salt or not, after all.”

“Don’t lump us together.”

“Please don’t group us.”

The two were in perfect harmony.

I get the feeling they’re only overly in sync when they’re dealing with me. Like how two countries with unending skirmishes form a temporary alliance when they spot a common enemy.

“... Ah, but I heard there’s actually pickled and dried watermelon skin, so I can’t deny it as a rule, but... to think someone would eat it raw...”

The skilled cook Orino-san said and sighed.

Gnn. How strange. Mom always praised me, “Akira, it’s good that you can eat

anything. Thanks to you, we don't have to put out the biodegradable waste." Personally, I was sure there was just as much a division in 'eating watermelon skin' as there was in 'eating shrimp tail', but from what I can see by their reactions, I'm part of a considerable minority. Perhaps I'm even the only one. As we enjoyed a friendly chat and ate, the watermelon was gone in no time.

"Let's save the rest for Kagurai-senpai."

I said. The two nodded, their expressions darkening a smidge. Kagurai-senpai was in the room from poor health. We didn't want her to think she was causing us any trouble, so we did our best to enjoy the beach the three of us.

"It really would've been best if we left one person to stay with her."
"I think it's alright. On the way out, I caught a glance at her, but she was out of the covers, working on her computer." Said Orino-san.
"Hmm. I wonder if she's looking up ways to get over her poor health."

She was a digital senpai even when down for the count.

No, perhaps that was inevitable.

to Kagurai-senpai, technology... her computer was the foundation of her heart. More reliable than anything, and at the same time, what she could rely on to remain constant.

That's why...

if she encountered something, a situation she couldn't comprehend herself, then surely it would be the first thing she relies on before anything else.

In the end, Kagurai-senpai didn't come to the beach. We ate dinner together, but after finishing her share, she quickly went off somewhere. When we were at the long-awaited training camp, her independent action was all the more conspicuous. She may be a senpai, but as the vice-president, shouldn't I give her a talking to? I thought, but when I saw her making a grim face all the way, I couldn't say anything. And, "..... Kagoshima," Kagurai-senpai dropped by my room with a perplexed face. It was after I'd eaten dinner, taken a bath, and played cards with Orino-

san and Kikyouin-san, just when I thought it was time to sleep.

“Something up? At this hour?”

I put out a cushion to welcome this late-night quest. After she sat down on it, she spoke in an uncharacteristically small voice.

“... There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

“Discuss?”

When I parroted her words, Kagurai-senpai gave a nod and closed her mouth. A pitiful silence flowed into the room.

Eventually,

“The truth is—”

She spoke up as if she had finally resolved herself.

Making a fist in front of her chest.

Her voice shaking a bit.

Looking at me with anxious eyes.

Her expression as if she would burst into tears at any moment.

She... introduced herself.

“I am a time traveler from the future.”

The tale I heard on the first night of training camp was quite the SF.

Science fiction, and slightly fantastical at that.

I’d say it was a bit too heavy for a bedtime story.

Kagurai-senpai gave a simple explanation without using any specialized terminology, but there were too many points she, ‘definitely couldn’t talk about,’ making her explanation hazy as a whole.

To put it together—

In the distant future—where civilization has developed much farther, where time travel becomes possible, and where a virtual exists as simple fact—humans depend on computers even more than in the modern era. Humans control avatars in a virtual space called the B3 World, and a majority of everyday life is spent in this space.

Holding questions towards this state of being ruled by computers, the

revolutionary organization that moved to action is named Reloader. Reloader's objective is the extermination of information technology. For that sake, they aimed for the time period the internet diffused and leapt to the past. In order to counteract them, the government's direct crisis management bureau dispatched agents to various time periods.

“And one of them... is me. Kagurai Monyumi.”

Kagurai-senpai continued on.

There was no space for questions. As if she was rejecting any questions from me, she spoke without pause. About the present—looping situation as well.

“We are repeating the first day of the training camp. It's still only the second loop. It seems I'm the only one aware of this peculiar phenomenon. It goes without saying, there might be someone out there much like me, who's been left out of the loop... but at the very least, there are none in the neighborhood.”

On top of that, there were two other strange happenings.

One. Every loop, someone disappears. In the first loop Kikyouin-san was gone, and in the second, Kurisu was nowhere to be found.

Two. Kagurai-senpai cannot dive into the B3 World.

“—And that's about it... Umm, yeah. I guess that covers everything.....”

When the story was over, Kagurai-senpai returned to the anxious face she had when she entered the room.

“Even if you hear a tale like that all of a sudden, I think it's only natural that you don't believe it...”

Kagurai-senpai bit tightly on her lip.

“... Hah.”

I let out a sigh bigger than ever before.

“When you came in the dead of the night, I was wondering what you were going to say... then you tell me about the future and virtual worlds, such absurd and astounding things and tell me to believe you.”

“... I get where you're coming from, but, but you see—”

“I believe you.”

I said.

Kagurai-senpai blankly raised her head.

“Then let’s move things forward. The fact that you told me, means there some circumstance that you need to inform me of, right?”

“Wai-wait a second. Hold it, hold it right there.”

Holding up her hand, she let out a hectic voice.

“... You believe? You’ll believe in what sounds like a bad joke?”

“Eh? It was a joke?”

“No, that’s nto it... it’s not, but...”

“In that case, I’ll believe.”

There, with an unsettled look on her face, Kagurai-senpai kept her face down.

“... I was sure you’d never believe something like this.”

“Something like this?”

“This sort of tale out of the everyday. Time leaps and the future... also, right. Psychics and magicians, and onmyouji, that sort of thing.”

“Ah, I see.”

Certainly, I shouldn’t believe in such unnatural occurrences.

Heroes that fight hiding their identity from everyone—don’t exist.

The ordinary is dear, don’t dream of the abnormal, I think that’s how I should be.

“I generally don’t believe. My policy is ‘An otherwise uninteresting world is also interesting’. That’s why I don’t believe in heroes of justice.”

But, I went on.

“I believe in you, Kagurai-senpai.”

“.....”

“So I’ll believe, everything you just said. Though honestly, I’m still half in doubt.”

Rather.

When she said it looking like she’d burst into tears at any moment, there’s no way I couldn’t believe her as a man. While it seems I could never notice Kagurai-senpai’s real identity, she wasn’t the sort of person who would tell such a lie

with a face like that—I knew.

“... Right. That’s the sort of guy you are.”

And there, for the first time tonight—no, the first time today—meaning the first time on the third loop of this first day, Kagurai-senpai shoed me a smile. As if her frozen air had thawed, a smile full of openings.

“You would always take all those idiotic excuses I arbitrarily thought up as true. You were always an idiot who idiotically believed everything people tell you...”

“Please don’t say idiot too much. You’re hurting me.”

“... Well, it looks like you don’t believe Kikyouin but... I’m sure that’s because she doesn’t really want you to believe her.”

“Kikyouin-san? Is there something up with Kikyouin-san too?”

“... Nothing. That’s not something I have any right to talk about. Don’t mind it. Now let’s get back on topic. Umm, why I told you about this, was it?”

“Yes.”

“The answer is simple. I’m at my wit’s end.”

As she said that, Kagurai-senpai took on a pose of surrender.

“I spent all of today in a staring contest with my computer, but I can’t see any resolution. If I could access the B3 World, I could amass a far greater amount of information at a far greater speed... but for some reason, that’s not possible.”

That’s why Kagurai-senpai searched all she could on the modern internet, apparently.

The first loop, Kikyouin-san’s absence caused her to look into relevant ghost stories and urban legends, eventually concluding it to be outside of her field of expertise.

But Kurisuchan’s disappearance on the second loop meant the cause was no longer restricted to apparitions.

“And you were troubled, so you came to discuss with me?”

“Something like that.”

“... Yeaaaah. I know I shouldn’t say this, but don’t you have the wrong guy?”

I somehow managed to take in the situation, but honestly, I hadn’t the slightest idea of what to do about it. Kagurai-senpai gave a slight smile,

“Perhaps,” she said.

“But that doesn’t matter... to tell you the truth, it’s been quite harsh on my mind. I got the feeling I was the only one being left behind by the world, it was more stressful than I expected.”

“Meaning you were lonely.”

“... Perhaps in short, but let’s not keep it short.”

Her cheeks turned a little red.

“I lament that I left Gakuta behind.”

She said with a deep sigh.

By the way, Gakuta-kun was an artificial intelligence, and she explained to me that her ventriloquism was a fake trick. The Gakuta-kun in question (At least the personality data inside of him) was currently offline, what’s more, safely stored with his power off, so there was no way to get him here.

“Then Kagurai-senpai, there’s one thing I’d like to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Is it alright that you revealed your identity to me?”

When she’s kept it hidden all this time.

When she grew desperate trying to cover it up.

“That’s... well, it’s probably fine,” Kagurai-senpai hesitated to speak.

“The world’s looping after all. If I reveal it to you, you’ll have forgotten it all by the next loop, right?”

“Ah.”

I was strangely accepting of it.

I see, since we’re looping, no matter what she tells me this time, when the next one comes around, all my memories will be reset.

“Now then. Now that I’ve finished explaining the situation, I’d like to get to action, but—we’re at the time limit.”

Kagurai-senpai shifted her eyes to the analogue clock on the wall.
The present time was eleven fifty-five.

“Time limit.”

“When it hits midnight, it seems like time is forcefully reverted to morning on

the first day. I tried to stay awake last time to make sure of the loop instant, but... it was impossible. The moment it struck twenty-four, my consciousness cut. Next I awoke, it was morning day one again."

"Then in another five minutes, we're going to return to today morning again?"

"That we will."

"... I see."

I feel conflicted. All my memories of today are about to vanish, and when I think of how today's going to start again, it all felt somewhat futile.

"When I've learned your secret, it's going to have never happened..."

"Don't worry, I'll tell you again tomorrow."

"I'm counting on you. Then let's work together from tomorrow morning. It looks like time's limited, so we'd better get an early start. Ah, but there's a possibility I might disappear..."

Since Kikyouin-san and Kurisuchan disappeared, there's a possibility me or Orino-san might be next. No, it's possible the only one who kept her memories, Kagurai-senpai could even...

As I thought over it like that,

"... Pff,ahaha."

Kagurai-senpai suddenly leaked a smile as if she couldn't hold it in anymore.

"What is it, all of a sudden?"

"Hahah, no, my apologies. The gap between your usual self was just so interesting to watch."

She said with a gentle smile.

"When you're usually so empty-headed... the moment you notice, you act all reliable, eh?"

It's like you're a different person.

Kagurai-senpai said.

It made me strangely bashful, I averted my eyes and gazed at the clock.

The first day of training camp ended... the clock struck midnight.

Chapter 3: The Masked Man

3rd Loop

The first morning of training camp.

I woke up, my body being crushed by something.

“Gohhah!”

“Wake up, Kagoshima! It’s morning! First day of camp, the third reiteration!”

A loud voice rung through my head. When I opened my eyes, a depiction of a pine tree was a few tens of centimetres from my face. If I recall correctly, that was the pattern on the sliding screen...

“Wait, why is the screen smashed in!?”

I protested to the girl still in the sturdy stance of having kicked the door in. Uwah, what are we going to do about this... it’s been split clean down the center, I can see the thin wood supports sticking through it. Are we going to have to pay for this?

What is this senpai doing so early in the morning...

“Now rise and shine, Kagoshima! As we promised yesterday, we’ll be starting early today. Time is limited.”

“Yesterday? Promise? What are you talking about?”

“Ah, I see. It’s a pain, but I’ll have to explain it again.”

Kagurai-senpai spoke.

All too easily.

“I actually came from the distant future.”

“And one of them is me. Kagurai—wait, don’t fall asleep dammit!”

A smack to the head shocked me awake.

“... FfaaAh. Sorry. You suddenly woke me up, so...”

“Good grief. You’d better listen properly.”

“Yeah, yeah. So how long until the punchline hits?”

“Punchline? There isn’t one.”

“Eh? Then what’s so interesting about it?”

“No, interesting or not, I’m simply expressing the truth.”

“Truth...?”

Then what?

She’s proposing that she’s someone from the distant future...

She forced me awake to tell me that...

“Umm, Kagurai-senpai... I won’t hold it against you, but you’re better off keeping those cringy statements to yourself.”

“Wha...”

“Like being a hero in your past life, or an envoy from another world, or an agent from the future, it’s honestly harsh to hear such statements of enlarged self-consciousness. If you don’t stop it with those delusional statements while you can, you’ll end up like Kurisuchan, no longer able to take them back.”

“Putting aside how you casually insulted Kurisu... wait a second, don’t tell me—you don’t believe me?”

Kagurai-senpai looked at me as if she’d been betrayed.

No, even if you give me that face, nothing I can do about it.

“I don’t believe you.”

I said.

“If you wake me up in the early morning, and tell me you’re from the future so carefree willy-nilly as if it’s the easiest thing in the world, there’s no way I’d ever believe.”

It would be stranger to actually believe something so absurd and astounding. At the very least— If she confessed with a greater sense of crisis or tension, I might have a different take on it, but as she did now with a light tone I can only think of as her telling a joke, I didn’t feel any urge to seriously keep her company.

And wait, I’m sleepy.

“... Eeh? No way, you...”

Kagurai-senpai put her hands to the floor in exaggerated lament.

“What even was our exchange last time... give me back that skip in my heart when you said you believed me without any hesitation...”

“Umm, if you’re done, can I go to sleep? I’d like to sleep another thirty minutes or so.”

Having recognized the future and so-forth as a joke, I pulled up the covers again and started my second round.

But Kagurai-senpai wouldn’t let me sleep. She shook my body from over the covers.

“W-wait, Kagoshima. You can’t fall sleep.”

“... What, am I going to die if I sleep?”

“No, we’re not on a snowy mountain, so you won’t die, but... a-anyways, listen to me. Just try to believe me.”

How persistent.

As she continually tried to rouse me from my half-asleep state, I drowsily threw out something arbitrary

“... If you’re going that far, let me test whether or not you’re actually from the future.”

“Test.”

“I’ll ask a few questions, and if you can answer them, I’ll believe you’re actually a time traveller.”

“... Alright. Got it, very well. As long as it’s not confidential, I’ll answer anything you’ve got.”

“Then number one. By its principle of aviation, Doraemon’s secret tool, the Takecopter is divided into two varieties. While one of them generates lift to fly, what mechanic does the other type use?”

“Hell if I know!”

Kagurai-senpai retorted with all her might, but I paid it no mind, and continued on with my arbitration. I’m too sleepy for this.

“Bzzt. Out of time. The correct answer is that it utilizes an anti-gravitational field. Good grief. To think people these days are calling themselves time travelers with this level of knowledge.”

“Wait, wait! Something’s strange here! Why does a time traveler have to be

knowledgeable about Doraemon!?”

“That goes without saying. The future promises a cat-shaped robot in every home.”

“No, rather than the field of robotics, the world develops more centered around computer networks... rather, in the first place, no matter how much time goes by, Doraemon won’t be made, you know?”

“Hah? You lookin’ for a beating?”

“Don’t snap at me! I’ve got no idea where your boiling point is!”

“Doraemon will be made in the year 2112. The French author Jules Verne once said, ‘Anything one man can imagine, other men can make real’.”

“... Uwah, this guy is a pain.”

And as she made a ruckus, I had completely fallen asleep.

When I woke up, it was already around noon.

“... I overslept.”

Going to sleep a second time caused me to oversleep, what a careless blunder. This is definitely because that senpai woke me at an ungodly hour. I panicked as I looked around, spotting two messages by my pillar.

The first, ‘You didn’t wake up no matter how many times I tried. I went to play with Kurisuchan. YOYOJK.’ This one was Orino-san’s. It was her handwriting, and judging by the awkward playful feeling I got from the ‘YOYOJK’ like an earnest person was trying their very best to joke around, it was very Orino-san-ish. The other, ‘Don’t know you anymore, stuuppiid!’ Those words written in anger were most likely Kagurai-senpai’s. I didn’t really remember but come to think of it, I got the feeling Kagurai-senpai came to my room in the morning, and we talked about something...

“Whatever the case, let’s go out.”

I hurriedly got my appearance in order, opened the sliding door, and descended the stairs towards the entranceway. At the entrance, the owner was washing away the sand.

“Oh. Good morning. You sure took your time.”

Noticing me, the owner spoke cynically.

“Yeah, overslept a bit. So do you know where the girls meant?”

“Um, the one with large jugs and small jugs said they were going to eat at a nearby restaurant.”

“... Hmm.”

Just because you don’t know their names, was there no other criteria to describe them?

“A restaurant you say... I was sure they went to the beach... ah, but the beach with just two people might be lonely.”

“Nah, nah. What are you talking about, bro? If you’re not around, there’s no point for the chicks to go to the sea. A girl’s swimsuit is there to show off to a man.”

Is that how it works?

... And wait, he’s suddenly acting all buddy-buddy, this owner. Just because the girls aren’t here, he’s displaying too much old man power.

“And if you want the upper-middle-class one, she went off somewhere with a grim look on ‘er face. Didn’t tell me where.”

So Kagurai-senpai’s upper-middle-class by this guy’s standards... nevermind that.

Kagurai-senpai’s taking independent action.

Hmm.

“Then did you at least see the direction the upper-middle-class person went?”
“It would have to be that way...”

The owner pointed at the path running along the coastline and hmhmm, he made a smile.

“I see, I see. So that lassie’s the one you’re gunning for, bro.”

“Nah man, it ain’t so...”

One-sidedly declaring my parting from the grinning owner, I went to search for Kagurai-senpai.

No real reason. But with what happened this morning, she was on my mind.

I continued down the path along the coastline. I was looking for someone who could be anywhere, so my walking pace was extremely lax. The sea and cliffs spread out to my left. The fresh green mountains to my left. And as I gazed down that summery scene alone, “Hm?” I spotted someone standing over the crags a small distance away.

A black coat, and long black trousers at the height of summer, they looked simply sweltering. Their hair went to their shoulders, and I couldn’t determine their gender from behind.

“Excuse me.”

I thought I’d ask about Kagurai-senpai and rushed over.

“I’m looking for someone but, but, but, but...”

The moment that person a little taller than me turned... I lost my words. The person was wearing a mask with a sharp design. The type that covered their face completely, not letting me make out a single expression.



Crap, I went and did it.
I called out to a weirdo...

“What, you have some business with me?”

The masked person said in a low voice. A man, it seemed.

“Umm, I’m looking for someone...”

“Did they perhaps have long hair, pretty long-slit eyes, tall with good proportions, the sort of girl you’d rather describe as beautiful than cute?”

“H-how did you know!?”

“I spotted her come down that road not too long ago.”

“Oh I see.”

Reasonable enough. But for him to be able to describe her appearance in the sort of detail you’d have to be acquainted with her to know, he must boast quite an aptitude for observation.

“There was no one else in the area, so I was sure that girl was the one you were looking for.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“No, not really. If you keep down this path, won’t you meet her eventually?”

“... Understood. Thank you.”

I got my hands on some information, and I didn’t want to get any more involved with this strange man, when, “Even so, this is a wonderful scene. Wouldn’t you say so?”

He tossed me a bone.

Wow, what do I do? I can’t leave. I don’t have the courage to ignore him.

“The brilliant light of the summer sun, and the great blue deep that glimmers in its radiance. The wind carrying the faint scent of salt comfortably stimulates the skin. A truly splendid situation. Makes you want to take the hand of that special someone and walk side by side.”

“I see.”

“However.”

The masked man’s words stagnated a short while.

“When I think of how this beautiful scene is all what’s been painted by the brain, it feels so empty.”

“Painted... by the brain.”

“We humans can’t perceive the world before us as it is. The information that infiltrates through our sensory organs is processed by the brain, with each and every world we know no more than a reproduction within it. And yet, that diminutive miniature garden painted by the brain is what man will call reality—and what he calls the world.”

“It’s... that. How they say humans can only know the world through the filter called self...”

Come to think of it, I get the feeling I talked about this with Kikyouin-san sometime back, I mused. I spoke so proudly of what I must’ve picked up from some manga or something. It’s a bit late, but I’m regretting it. The masked man gave a light nod at my words. I couldn’t make out his expressions, but I got the impression he was probably smiling.

“And that’s precisely why... everything is an illusion.”

“Illusion...”

“Right, an illusion. A dream and a phantasm. No one out there knows where reality starts and the illusion ends.”

The masked man said, as he shifted his hidden eyes from me to the ocean.

“And that’s precisely why you should enjoy your summer vacation like it’s a dream, young student.”

“Wait, what? That’s what you were talking about?”

It was so roundabout, and I get the feeling the point of discussion shifted considerably, but... so be it.

“You’re on a trip with your friends, right? It’s a waste if you don’t enjoy it.”

“It’s not a trip, we’re on training camp for what it’s worth. Are you travelling too? Or do you live in the area?”

“I’d have to say it’s different from a trip. I’m here for work or obligation... no, in the end, I’ll call it a trip. I came all the way out here to clean up after my own mess.”

All the way out here?

Ah, no, I don’t think he’s making fun of the region. A place so far away, that’s probably his nuance.

“Could it be you came from somewhere far away?”

“Right you are. A very far place.”

“Outside the prefecture?”

“Further.”

“Then overseas?”

“Further still.”

“Further than overseas... don't tell me space?”

“Further, further.”

“Eh? Is there anything further than space?”

To my question, the masked man calmly gave what he made sound like the obvious answer.

“I came from the future.”

.....

.....

“Hmm. Did you now.”

I said with a broad smile.

Yep. It's finally clear.

I'm dealing with a loopy person.

Well, he's wearing a mask, he started talking about the world and so forth, there were plenty of red flags. I wonder if the heat got to him.

“Ah, I should really be getting off.”

I didn't want to keep this strange person company any longer, so I endeavoured not to make an unpleasant or suspicious face as I nonchalantly parted from him.

As I returned to the coastal path, from behind, “But now that I think back on it..... loop phenomenon..... reiterating the world... resembles Shinose's..... ability... it must be back when..... I.....”

I heard an ominous, dangerous monologue I couldn't make heads or tails of, so my feet naturally picked up the pace.

“... Well, if you're going to insist that much, then I'll believe that you're a time traveler...”

“I see, thank you Kagoshima—wait, it's already midnight!”

Just as Kagurai-senpai pointed out, the night had already advanced. We were in my room. Present time, twenty-three, fifty. After I spotted Kagurai-senpai on the coast path (By the way, Kagurai-senpai was on a walk to clear her mind, apparently), we spent our time doing normal training camp things. Within all of that, Kagurai-senpai measured her time to bring up her time travel talk. If she was that desperate, perhaps she was telling the truth, I started to think. And finally—late into the night, I decided to believe her.

“Hey, what’s with you man? Seriously, what’s with you? I have to spend a whole day convincing you or you won’t believe? This whole day was a complete waste.”

Kagurai-senpai rapidly inflicted punches to the room’s cushion as she complained.

“You do have my apologies in that regard... but I think some responsibility lies with you.”

“Hah?”

“D-don’t glare. You’re scaring me. No, I mean, when I’ve just gotten up and my head’s hazy, if you tell me, ‘I’m from the future’ with such a light tone, I’d naturally think you were messing around.”

“... Yeaah, right. You have a point.”

Accepting it momentarily, Kagurai-senpai made an awkward face.

“I’ll admit, I was convinced you would believe, and totally let down my guard. In contrast, the time before, meaning my first confession had considerable tension and unease... that’s where the difference came out, eh... even if I tell the same person the same thing, one’s situation and mental state will largely change how they take it.”

Hah, she sighed, sticking a hand into her long hair.

“... And presumably, once Kagoshima came to the recognition, ‘I don’t believe,’ it was difficult to revise that notion. You are quite strongly opinionated, after all.”

“Yeah, you think so?”

I get the feeling, ‘strongly opinionated’ is one of those personality assessment

terms like 'can be indecisive' and 'has a self-centered side' that you can fit anyone into, but I can't really tell myself.

"Yeah, you've got it bad."

Kagurai-senpai said so seriously, so I must be considerably strongly opinionated.

"Anyways. Then next time—and this is only if time really winds back at twenty four, from next time onwards, please try to be a bit more serious when you convince me."

"No. There's no longer any need. We have a far easier method. A special measure I thought up when on my walk."

"And what is this special measure?"

"I just have to know something only you know. If I do that, then next time onwards you'll go, 'I-I never told anyone about that! Which means we really are—!' It'll make it easier for you to believe we're currently caught in a loop, and on top of that, you should believe I'm from the future as well."

"I see."

That's quite a normal idea for a special measure, I thought, but as I had some guilt for not taking her seriously all day, I'll honestly act impressed.

"And so, Kagoshima. Tell me something you've never told a soul."

"... No. I don't want to tell you any secrets I've never told anyone else before."

"Nothing we can do about it, this is an emergency. Just bear with me. Now, now, out with all your nasty, embarrassing secrets."

She said sounding a little excited. Isn't she kinda enjoying this? I folded my arms and tried thinking. But even if she asked me, nothing hit me at such short notice.

"Anything works... ah, right. If you can't think of anything, how about your favorite attributes?"

"Attributes? Hmm, my favorite types would have to be fire and electric."

"... How fitting that Pokémon was the first thing you thought up when I said... never mind. I'm talking about girls. When you say attributes, of course you're talking about girls."

"I don't think that's a given."

“What sort of girls do you like? Glasses girls? Klutz girls? Little sisters? Childhood friends? Flat lolis? Cat ears? Monster girls? Mikos? Maids?”

She asked as if her game mind could go on and on beyond that. It's kinda, that. Perhaps the difference between a standard person and an otaku, is whether you think of a real person or fiction when asked what your type is, I began to wonder.

“If I had to say, ‘widows’, perhaps?”

“Widows!?”

Like her spine had given way, Kagurai-senpai took a great lurch back.

“Kagoshima... you hit upon something amazing... even I didn't see that one coming...”

“Eh? But aren't widows great? I'm a huge fan of Maison Ikkoku, you see. That sort of way she still drags on the memory of her late husband, and how her heart waned and swayed between her ex-husband and the main character really clenched at my heart.”

“... Look who's talking.”

Kagurai-senpai pilled back somewhat.

It does seem she wasn't pleased with my taste in women. Come to think of it, a majority of the games Kagurai-senpai plays are school-based. Yeaah. I really do think they're nice, though. Widows.

These days, the girls in manga and anime are all minors, so perhaps my widow love is a backlash from that. It's about time I'd like to see a woman in her late twenties as the main heroine of an anime.

“I see... so in order to date you, I'll have to first marry someone else, and get that husband killed off somehow... that's a high hurdle.”

“Hold it! When I say I like widows, I'm keeping that to fiction! Keep those hands clean!”

I'm just saying I like human dramas that have a widow as the main. I wouldn't actually want to date one. I'd prefer a normal cute girl. Mn?

But I get the feeling Kagurai-senpai said something about dating me... no, must've been a figure of speech.

“... Well, whatever the case, I’ve got a keyword. Widow... that will be my keyword do make you believe me.”

What a terrible keyword. Not a shred of coolness.

“let me confirm this, Kagoshima. You never leaked your widow fetish to anyone, have you?”

“I haven’t. I never had the opportunity to talk about this sort of thing. Ah, don’t tell anyone. I said it because it’s you.”

I insisted, and, “Yeah, it’s a promise,” she nodded.

Like that, we had finished one of the preparations for the next loop onwards. Which means we must move to the next stage.

“By the way, Kagurai-senpai. Let’s say your preparations to make me a comrade are done, do you have any specific plans henceforth?”

In order to resolve this troublesome situation... what do we do?

“I’ve done some thinking. Though it’s still a vague idea, the situation as it is.”

Kagurai-senpai’s expression sharpened, her tone turned serious.

“There has to be a culprit to this looping situation we’ve been caught up in. Rather than culprit, someone serving as the cause. Whether we can identify them or not... I can’t tell if they have any ill intent or not. There’s a possibility they might be unconsciously causing the loop.”

“Wait a second. It’s already decided there’s a culprit? Couldn’t we have been wrapped up in a natural disaster...”

“Of course, the possibility exists, but I appraise this as a man-made affair.”

“Why?”

“It’s not like I was playing around these three reiterations. The first time I knew Kikyouin was missing, so I looked into whether anyone else had disappeared. Gathering information from the area, searching the net and such.”

As a result, she concluded no one apart from Kikyouin-san had disappeared in the first loop.

“The second time, it was Kurisu who disappeared. As with the first one, I investigated. No one apart from Kurisu disappeared.”

And the third time.

Kikyouin-san disappeared again, and once more the result was the same.

“Meaning this is a high probability this loop is an event someone has caused with us as the target.”

Us. Pointing to the members of the ComClub on training camp.

Someone was aiming at us?

“What reason would they have to...?”

“No idea. Not in the slightest. But the probability we are suffering damage by someone’s will is exceedingly high... rather, if it were an incident or natural disaster, there’s nothing we can do about it. I can only look into it under the premise there is a culprit.”

Hmm. I kinda get it, kinda don’t.

“That’s why what we’re doing is searching out the culprit. We’ve got to somehow weed out suspicious individuals.”

Well, that sounds about right.

For now, her means aren’t wrong. And if they were, we’d just have to change them.

A situation where tomorrow will never come. Ironically, it means she had all the time in the world.

“But... in three reiterations, I was unable to find anyone who could be the culprit... how about you, Kagoshima? Did you spot anyone suspicious?”

It was truly a light question. As if she had no expectations. I could tell very clearly she asked knowing it was hopeless. “Let’s see,” I reflected over my day. Someone suspicious. Well, someone like that—

— I’m from the future.

.....

Huh?

“Mm. What’s wrong, Kagoshima? That’s not normal, the way you’re sweating.”

“K-Kagurai-senpai. U-um, how should I put it, it’s that. I can only identify a suspicious individual from my subjective opinion... what’s strange and what’s not is completely different from person to person...”

“Come to think of it, you’re right. Just expressing it as suspicious might be too vague of a criteria.”

“I know, right! That’s why if there’s a man out there wearing a coat as if to conceal their physique, a mask to hide their identity, who on top of that came out with ‘I’m from the future,’ there’s no guarantee that they’re suspicious, right?”

“No, dude, that’s suspicious!”

She leaned in a screamed.

“K-Kagoshima! You came in contact with such an obviously suspicious individual!?”

“Y-yes...”

“Why did you let him go!? Why did you ignore him!?”

“I-I mean... I didn’t really know about loops or time travelers at the time... and after getting a proper gasp on a weirdo’s eccentricities, it’s my motto to splendidly ignore them.”

“Hah... you really are...”

Exhaling a momentous sigh, Kagurai-senpai dropped her shoulders. I think she’s around one fourth of why I deal with oddballs by catch and release, but, well, let’s keep quiet about that for now.

“It’s too hasty to conclude the masked man is the culprit, but there’s no doubt he’ll understand the situation. From the future, eh...”

“Umm... the first question I’d be asking is if it’s even possible to rewind time. Did that become possible in the future?”

If time travel is possible, then it wouldn’t be strange for something like that, I thought, but, “Impossible,” Kagurai-senpai cleanly denied it.

“I’ve never heard of the technology to manipulate time. That’s on a whole ‘nother level from leaping around it. Even with the technological might of my era, it would be a fruitless dream. You can’t turn back the world itself, and you can’t seal flesh and blood humans in an artificial space either.”

Hmm. So even if a Time Machine is possible, a Tanma Watch isn't. Well I get the feeling the later would be harder to invent anyways.

"Wait, huh? Then the masked man from the future can't be the culprit, right?"

"Were you properly listening? I said it would be impossible with the technological might of my own era."

Said Kagurai-senpai.

"It's possible that he came from a future even further ahead than the time I lived."

"....."

Sure enough, the masked man only said, "I came from the future". I see, so it's possible a human who came from an era where even time can be manipulated came to this time period and sealed us in a loop.

"It's only a possibility. Maybe..... it's thinkable something from a world I have no connection to is causing it. Magic or psychic powers, or eastern spellcraft, if something like that exists in the world, it's outside my expertise."

Kagurai-senpai said especially purposefully.

"No need to worry, magic, psychic powers, and spellcraft don't exist, so there's no doubt this incident is connected to you, Kagurai-senpai."

When I gave obvious advice, "... Right," she returned a bitter smile.

"Whatever the case, nothing else to do but search for the masked man you met. We can ask him his means and objective in making the loop once we've caught him."

I nodded at those words.

The third me... nodded with the feelings the third me should have.

As I was explaining the particulars and appearance of the masked man, the clock struck midnight.

Chapter 4: Lonely Girl

13th Loop

The first morning of training camp.

When I opened my eyes, Kagurai-senpai was sitting by my pillow.

“Good morning, thirteenth Kagoshima. This may be sudden, but listen to me. I’m—”

And I received an explanation on the situation we were wrapped up in. It was an astounding story, but as Kagurai-senpai knew I loved widows for some reason, I had no choice but to believe her.

According to her, we were currently on the thirteenth loop.

The world had repeated itself thirteen times.

No matter how long we waited, it would never be the second day of training camp.

My memories were reset every time, but Kagurai-senpai retained her own.

“I checked the girls’ room when I woke up, and Kurisu was the only one there. The ones who disappeared this time were Orino and Kikyouin.”

I certainly remember the two of them having urgent business to attend to. Kagurai-senpai said that each time the world looped, the members attending the camp would change.

Within the thirteen loops, the absentees would always be chosen from Orino Shiori, Kurisu Crimson Kuria, and Kikyouin Yuzuki at random.

What’s more, it happened twice before that two people were absent.

“For some reason... me and you are always here. I don’t know why. Perhaps even this is part of the culprit’s objective.”

Only me and her... we couldn’t be absent from the story.

If you’re asking what the only (presumably) person to keep her memories, the time traveler Kagurai Monyumi, and Kagoshima Akira who heard her story had been doing over the course of thirteen loops, we were searching for the masked

man who might be the culprit, apparently.

A far-too-suspicious masked man I met on loop number three.

Naturally, I don't remember meeting him. So when the third me's explanation of his appearance was told to me again, it became a strange game of telephone.

"But we couldn't find him no matter how hard we looked."

Even if we headed for the crags where I encountered him, or searched the area around Guesthouse Sunflower in the time permitted, the masked man didn't exist.

And at the end of her tether, Kagurai-senpai's net course of action was an internal investigation.

"An internal investigation?"

"To investigate whether the culprit is manipulating someone among us. Kagoshima. This time, I'll have you observe Kurisu. I'm not telling you to do anything to her. Just stay with her, and if there's anything strange about her, then report it to me."

"... You want me to suspect a friend?"

I frankly expressed the fuzzy feeling in my chest.

"Not at all. I want you to believe in her. And it's possible that one of those three is related to this incident unaware of it themselves, right? Like a postman who delivers a box not knowing it contains a bomb."

"....."

"And wait, this is the third time I'm giving you this explanation."

"What?"

"The time before, and the one before that, I had you look into Orino and Kikyouin... good grief, you react the same way every time. Trusting your friends is splendid, but I've just about gotten tired of that response."

By the way, judging by my report the time before, and the one before that, there was nothing strange about Orino-san or Kikyouin-san.

"... I know I shouldn't be saying this, but can you really rely on my investigations and reports?"

I'm quite confident I can let anything suspicious or strange slip by at a tremendous speed.

“Honestly, no.”

Kagurai-senpai said honestly. That honesty hurt a bit.

“I’ve already operated alongside those three a number of times, and only after I’ve determined ‘nothing abnormal,’ I’ve asked to have a go. It’s like checking answers.”

There, Kagurai-senpai made a tired face.

“... For now, we can only do everything that comes to mind.”

“You’re, right...”

The air turned a little dark. She smoothly stood, and in a cheerful voice to erase that dark atmosphere, she said this.

“Well, I’m counting on you a bit. Perhaps you might see something I was unable to see myself. Perhaps those girls will show you something they won’t show me.”

And so.

My task was to play together with Kurisuchan.

“It’s not half bad. This is the first time I’ve eaten shaved ice.”

She said, all smiles with a spoon in one hand.

[IMAGE]

On the bench at the side of the guesthouse’s entrance, Kurisuchan and I gazed at the sea as we ate our shaved ice. Mine was blue Hawaii flavour, while Kurisuchan was strawberry. We had the owner make them. We did discuss going to the beach, but playing on the beach just the two of us sounded lonely, so we gave up on that.

“Kagurai-senpai should’ve come out and eaten with us. I wonder what she’s doing?”

“Who knows. But she took it when I brought it to the room, so she should be fine.”

Kagurai-senpai was holed up in the room, moving to break through this situation. I didn’t hear the specifics on what she was doing. Either way, I doubt I’d understand if I heard them, and my memories would reset at twenty-four, so

there was no point in me learning detailed information.

I would simply move on her orders.

This time's... the thirteenth me's job was to observe Kurisuchan.

I stayed with her from morning, and observed her in my own way, but as things stood, nothing was amiss. It was the usual Kurisuchan.

"Ah, come to think of it, Kagoshima-senpai."

As I turned my thoughts on various things, Kurisuchan turned the conversation to me.

She spoke in a truly innocent smile.

"Are you a virgin?"

"....."

My thoughts froze. I narrowly avoided dropping my blue Hawaii.

... Huh?

What did this kid just say so innocently?

Was she that sort of character?

IS it really alright for me to report this to Kagurai-senpai as suspicious behavior?

"..... W-ww-well, well, let's see, I might be... it might just happen to be a lie if I told you I wasn't a virgin. But, well, there are a number of ways to interpret that sort of thing, and in the end, the lifeform called humankind can only speak from a personal subjective position, so I can't say anything unconditionally, and it's dangerous to assert one's own thoughts as the thoughts of the whole, so I can't really say anything."

As I sweat and acted suspiciously, Kurisuchan's face flushed a little red.

"H—huh? Did I possibly ask something strange? I-I'm sorry!"

She apologize.

"Umm, uh, the truth is... I don't know the meaning of the word virgin..."

"Oh, so that's it. That's how it is."

That makes sense. From time to time, Kurisuchan's surprisingly distanced

from common sense.

It's almost like she came from another world.

"The other day, when you weren't around, I was talking with the others, and the word came up a few times..."

Looks like the ComClub girls have some considerably deep girls talk in my absence. Is that how it gets when girls are only around girls...

"When I asked Kikyouin-senpai, 'Hah!? Hell if I know! Why don't you ask Orino? She's quite the closet pervert.' she told me."

"... You're good at impressions."

"When I asked Orino, '... U-umm, you're better off asking Kagurai-senpai that sort of thing. Yeah, that person's always playing strange games, she should be knowledgeable. I'd rather not teach you something wrong.' She told me."

Looks like Kurisuchan was deferred.

"And when I asked Kagurai-senpai, 'It means someone like Kagoshima'."

Oy, that's too direct, senpai.

"And so I asked you, but... umm, did I ask something strange?"

When she said it so apologetically, "No, not at all. Don't worry about it," was all I could manage.

"Is that true? Then please teach me what it means to be a virgin!"

Crap.

Since I didn't reject her, she latched on.

Ah, now I get it. How my mom felt when I asked her, "Hey, hey, mom. Where do babies come from." In the end, my dad taught me, "Babies, you see, they come from sex, sex I tell ya!" and got into a big fight with mom, but thinking back on it now, it was a good memory.

Kurisuchan stared at me with glimmering eyes of curiosity. With her gazing at me in such a way, I couldn't even keep silent.

"V-virgin means... t-that. A reserve magician. If you stay a virgin up to thirty, there's a legend you become a magician..."

"A reserve magician!? Virgins can become magicians!?"

Ah, crap. By the time I noticed it, it was already too late.

“No way... To think there are people who can use magic in this world too. The people over here shouldn’t have the necessary constitution to use magic... but, if that’s true... Kagoshima-senpai! Please give me the specifics!”

She bit on super hard. I went and did it. Magic’s taboo around Kurisuchan. Losing the battle to her gaze that increased twenty percent in intensity, I winced back. Dammit, I can’t escape from those pure, untainted eyes. I was cornered and troubled... but at that instant, I was hit by a flash of inspiration.

That’s right, a pinch is a new opportunity!

“Kurisuchan.”

“Yes.”

“A virgin is actually a type of food.”

“Eh? It’s food? Then why did you just say they were magicians?”

“Oh, leave that aside for a while. It must’ve been a homonym or something. Anyways, a virgin is an extremely tasty type of food.”

“I see.”

“I heard the virgin reached our soil from southeast Asia and northern Russia, it’s a traditional staple food. Once already prepared, it’s referred to as virginity. They’re often prepared for cooking in a special way that involves plucking the petals of a flower, so in technical terms, eating a virgin is referred to as deflowering.”

“Hmm.”

“I know a few people, so I’ve got some virginity with me. The finest quality virginity. Kurisuchan, do you want a taste?”

“Let’s see. If it’s tasty, I’d like to try it.”

“Yeah, then try saying it a little sweetly, and action!”

“I want to eat up Kagoshima-senpai’s virginity.”

“.....”

I thought I was going to die, in various ways. W-what destructive power...

Two great regrets pressed down on my heart.

First was a regret drawn from the guilt of tainting such an innocent young girl. The other... was a regret drawn from anger towards myself for not having a

recorder at the ready.

Now then.

We've messed around enough, I'd better properly tell her. Dropped the cherub down far enough. I'll have to take responsibility.

"... Kagoshima-senpai? Why are you suddenly kneeling on the bench?"

"Kurisuchan. You should do the same. We're about to have a serious discussion."

"...?"

While she blankly tilted her head, she kneeled on the bench as I told her and faced me.

Now, Kagoshima Akira presents the birds and the bees for all the good kids out there.

I properly taught her accurate information. Without even running off to figurative expressions or euphemisms, I looked her right in the eye and faced her fair and square. As expected, Kurisuchan did have a certain level of knowledge pertaining to sex, she soon understood the meaning of virginity. Throughout my careful and thorough explanation, "Eep," she averted her eyes a number of times, but in a tone more serious than I'd ever been, "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's a path everyone must pass through," I gently showed her the way.

"A-a-auau....."

Once I was done, Kurisuchan hung her bright red face.

"I-I'm terribly sorry for asking such a strange thing..."

She let out a mumbling sound that barely registered as a voice as she deeply lowered her head. Since she was on her knees from the start, it looked like the greeting of a tea ceremony or kendo match.

"It's fine. If you didn't know, there was nothing you could do about it."

I called out in a kind, senpai-ish voice and pat her on the head.
Now that's case closed.

"... Huh? Then what did you mean when you said it was a type of food...?"

“Now Kurisuchan! Let’s move on! Ah, I’ll wash both our shaved ice bowls!”

I sprung off the bench, stacked the two empty bowls, and rushed into the guesthouse interior. Kurisuchan seemed somewhat unsettled, but, well, I somehow managed to play it off.

I headed for the kitchen, rinsed the bowls in the sink, and called out to the owner.

“Thanks for the shaved ice, it was a real treat. Where should I leave these?”

“Ah, thanks for the wash. Just leave them on that table.”

As he said, I left out the two bowls.

“I’ll get the bowl from the person eating in the room later.”

“No problem. But I wonder why that lass shut herself inside. When it’s so nice out.”

“She’s got some stuff going on. She’s not particularly sick or anything, so don’t worry.”

The owner turned the faucet to stop the water, before wiping his hands on his apron as he walked towards me.

“Don’t tell me. It’s a lover’s spat?”

He gave an off-the-mark question.

“Not at all.”

“You were with small jugs the whole time, so I’m sure you got upper-middle-class sulking, surely.”

He prodded his elbow into me. Honestly, it was a tad annoying. Just because the girls aren’t around, he’s exhibiting his old man power.

“You make me sound like a small-breast fetishist. If I had to say, I go for the larger ones.”

“Hmm. So the one you’re gunning for is big jugs. For your honey bunny to be absent, you’re seriously out of luck, bro.”

“Orino-san’s chest certainly is... no, anyways, that’s not—”

... Wait, what?

“Oh? What’s up, bro? Freezing up like that?”

“Yeah, no. It’s nothing. I’d better be off.”

And I left the kitchen in a hurry. First I made for outside the guesthouse and spoke with Kurisuchan.

“Kurisuchan, wait here a bit. I’ve got something to discuss with Kagurai-senpai,” I informed her, and while she made a perplexed face, “I understand,” she said. She really is an honest and good kid, I recognized anew.

And I made for the girls’ room on the second floor.

I had naturally... broken into a sprint.

When I stopped before the screen and called out, Kagurai-senpai instantly answered.

“What’s up? Are you here for the bowl?”

“Kagurai-senpai...”

I said.

Sensing the acceleration of my heartbeat.

“The owner maintains his memories.”

“—! Wha—”

Kagurai-senpai shut her own mouth partway through and whispered. “... Come in,” she said and let me into the room.

Into the room with only two peoples’ worth of luggage. Kagurai-senpai’s expression turned grim, she lowered her voice and demanded an explanation.

“What do you mean, Kagoshima? You’re telling me the owner, that middle-aged man keeps his memories between loops?”

“Yes. Most likely in the same way you do.”

I spoke the off-feeling I was getting as-is.

“That owner knew that Orino-san has huge breasts.”

“Hah? What about that is...! I see!”

While she showed irritation at the words huge breasts for an instant, it looks like she noticed quick enough. Right. When there was no way he should know

Orino-san's appearance, the owner knew her rack.

I mean, Orino-san wasn't taking part in this training came.

The only ones on this thirteenth training camp are Kagurai-senpai, Kurisuchan and I.

The other two were off on urgent business. Or so it became.

It can't be helped if Kagurai-senpai didn't notice the moment I said I t. She had experienced thirteen iterations of camp. I heard Orino-san took part a number of times. Then perhaps there were times when Orino-san met the owner.

But in tis time, the owner and Orino-san never had the chance to meet.

"So he keeps his memories just as I do...!"

Kagurai-senpai's breath was rough, she clenched her fist.

"... But Kagurai-senpai. I have a question... you've already looked into the owner, haven't you?"

That was the only part holding me up. She said she had already investigated all the individuals around this guesthouse. Naturally, that should include the owner. In a sense, he was the existence close to us, and the first person to hold in doubt.

It's impossible that I noticed something Kagurai-senpai overlooked.

"... Kagoshima, have you ever played the one hundred poets, one hundred cards game?"

(TL: This is a form of Karuta played with one hundred famous poems of one hundred famous poets)

I never had so I shook my head.

"I'm not saying I'm able to do it, but I remember all the poems. In an attempt to do something about my classics grade, I started practicing the game, and there was a time I found it considerably interesting and god hooked."

Using the hundred poet hundred card game t o raise one's classics grade doesn't sound totally wrong, but isn't that far to inefficient? I thought, but I didn't want to break the back or her argument, so I held my tongue.

"In the hundred poets hundred cards game, you must have the ability to memorize the location of all of the lined-up cards within the time limit... and the

ability to forget what you've learned just as fast."

"The ability to forget?"

"When you have a number of matches in one day, the previous match's memories become a hinderance, apparently."

The previous match's memories become a hinderance.

The last time's memories—become a hindrance.

"Don't you think that's similar to the current situation?"

Kagurai-senpai said, lightly shrugging her shoulders.

"I just noticed. In this looping situation, if someone who keeps their memories is trying to cover that fact up, it will become more difficult for them with every new loop."

"... I see."

Even if they carried memories all the same, it was a different story when Kagurai-senpai had no need to hide that fact.

That person would need to keep a constant grasp on where last time ended, and this time began. It might not be too hard the first few times. But each additional loop should have them second guessing. The more proficient they are, the stronger their memory is.

And the owner finally made a mistake this time.

"Of course, just keeping his memories does not determine he is the culprit. At present, I also keep my memories for some reason—but."

"The way he covered up that fact is the mark of the culprit!"

Large nods around.

The sort of smile she couldn't hold in spread across Kagurai-senpai's mouth. In a situation where she was groping around in the darkness without any idea what to do, she finally spotted the light. By my senses, the investigation didn't even last half a day, but from Kagurai-senpai's point of view, she had investigated for close to two weeks, and was only now approaching the culprit.

"Alright, Kagoshima, we're going to draft a pl—"

"Ah man. So the cat's out of the bag."

There.

The sliding screen abruptly slammed open. Kagurai-senpai and I reflexively raised our guard.

“Just as Monyumi said, it became a bother the thirteenth time around. That’s right, that’s right, it’s not big jugs, it’s the flat one this iteration.”

The one who breached the girls’ room—was the owner.

But he was clearly acting strange. At the very least, the owner I knew, the owner of the thirteenth loop didn’t talk like that.

“You could call it my mistake, and you’d be right, but I’ve just about gotten sick of this closed world, so you could just as well call it good timing.”

“... What are you?”

In regards to the owner whose smile had distanced itself from peaceful to an irritating grin, Kagurai-senpai responded with a voice of hostility.

“Don’t say my first name like we’re friends.”

“Mn? Ah, right, right. How thoughtless of me. No way you’d recognize me in the body of this fatty old man.”

Said the owner.

“It’s me. Shakuji Hihiko.”

“—!”

Kagurai-senpai’s eyes opened wide at the name.

“You know him?”

“... He’s a colleague.”

Kagurai-senpai answered without taking her eyes off the owner—Shakuji-san. Colleague. Which means, this person also came from the—

“Oy, oy, Monyumi. Watch your Japanese there. Phrase it like that, and you make it sound like we’re on the same level. Properly tell the boy we’re boss and grunt.”

“Hm. I have no reason to revere you when you’re not my direct superior.”

“You’re as shrewd as ever, Monyumi.”

Good grief, Shakujii-san breathed a sigh, with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

“... What are you trying to do, Hihihiko?”

“What am I trying to do?”

“Don’t play dumb! What did you come to this era for!? What was your objective in sealing me in this loop! And what theory did you use to produce this situation! What’s more, you...”

“Hey, hey, calm down why don’t you. I’m an elite, so it’s possible for me to process three or four questions at once, but even so, a human has only one mouth.”

All her yells were lightly parried. Kagurai-senpai only grew more displeased, but without holding on that, Shakujii-san went on at his own pace.

“Umm, first was what I came here for, was it? That’s simple. Monyumi, I came to observe you.”

“Observe, me?”

“Right. You can exaggerate your own reports all you want. To make sure you’re properly doing your job, surprise inspectors are sent at regular intervals. It’s not like it’s never happened that the people pursuing terrorists turn to the enemy’s side themselves, and it’s also a countermeasure for that.”

“... I see. I did hear I’d have an inspection eventually, but to think you would be the one to come for me.”

“Don’t make that face. I’m just doing my job too. So, what was net? Ah, that’s right, right, this situation—in regards to this loop where you and your merry companions can never move on to tomorrow.”

Shakujii-san stuck up his index finger, twirling it to draw a small circle in space.

“Round and round, round and round. Round and round and round and round. Unable to move forward, you continue turning circles in the same place forever. Almost like our human race, now doesn’t that sound all pessimistic and cool?”

He said in jest, stopped his finger, and pointed it at Kagurai-senpai.

“What’s bothering you most at this very moment it probably this loop. But forming this paranormal phenomenon is impossible with our level of

technology.”

“That’s right! That’s what I thought, so how did—”

“Hold it. You’re making a fundamental misunderstanding.”

That snarling scream was contained with a flippant wave of the hand.

“I’m not the culprit.”

Said Shakuji-san.

“... Say what?”

“I haven’t done a thing. I gazed upon this loop from the outside, and thought it looked like a convenient way to observe you, so I simply made use of it.”

Kagurai-senpai’s expression turned even grimmer.

Shakuji-san said this loop wasn’t caused by him.

Which means—

“The culprit is elsewhere?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s just as you say, kid. The true culprit is elsewhere.”

“You make it sound almost as if you know who it is, Hihiko.”

“I know everything. But I won’t tell you. Rather, I don’t think I even have to.”

Shakuji-san said easily. In a light tone holding the contempt that we couldn’t even solve a problem on this level.

“Only once I held an accurate grasp of the situation as a whole did I borrow this guesthouse owner’s body and watch over your farce. Only watched, without taking part in the situation.”

“Borrowing his body, you make it sound easy, but transferring your personality into a person of the past to manipulate them is forbidden, last I checked. You broke that regulation just to observe me?”

“Yeah, this time’s an exception.”

“An exception, you say?”

“You’ll understand eventually. No matter how much of a dunce you are, eventually.”

“Hmph. I’d rather not be called a dunce by someone who was seen through by the likes of Kagoshima.”

Kagurai-senpai went on the counteroffensive.

But... did she just casually throw me under the bus?

“Haha. You hit where it hurts. I was wary of you, but honestly, I was completely making light of the boy.”

Shakujii sent me a sidelong glance.

“That boy seemed painfully dense, so I thought he wouldn’t notice.”

Now that you mention it, that’s definitely strange.

For me to feel something off in a conversation with someone, and actually pay attention to it, that’s never happened to me before. It’s not like me.

I wonder if something was changing.

Did my noticing that Kagurai-senpai came from the future start changing something within me?

“And with that, I’ve answered all your questions. Let’s get my other job done with while I’m here. Monyumi, I have something I need to report to you.”

“Report?”

“Normally I’d have the boy leave, but... does it matter? You’ll have forgotten anything once the next time comes around.”

Gazing at me with belittling eyes, Shakujii-san entered the main topic.

“The mini-garden plan is proceeding at an astonishingly pace.”

Kagurai-senpai’s eyebrow twitched.

“What did you say? That can’t be... it’s absurd. That plan founded on nothing but idealism is actually going well...?”

“I don’t blame your surprise. Honestly, it shocked all the Inoue Big Three. It was a plan they thought no more than an empty theory, but once we actually began, it proceeded idiotically smooth. We calculated it would take a thousand years, but they say we might be able to actualize it in less than half that time.”

“.....”

“Perhaps the world was waiting for humanity to actualize this plan.”

Shakujii-san made a somewhat cynical smile, Kagurai-senpai stayed silent with a conflicted look on her face. I hadn’t the slightest idea what they were talking about. A future conversation between future people.

“Nooow then. It’s about time I headed back. I finished your inspection long ago, told you what I had to, and have thoroughly grown sick and tired of this situation.”

“W-wait!”

As Shakijii-san turned his back to us and tried to leave the room, Kagurai-senpai frantically called him to a stop.

“What? I’ll just say it, I’m not telling you how to get out. If you can’t resolve a situation of this level on your own merit, you’ve got no future prospects.”

“.....”

“Oh, but I don’t mind telling you the results of the inspection.”

“H-hah? The hell are you on about? There’s no way you’ll get off reporting the inspection results directly to the inspectee.”

“Precisely. That’s why what I’m going to say is my personal inspection result.”

Said Shakuji-san, erasing the frivolous smile unsuited for a middle aged man that had hung on his face the whole time.

“I’m disappointed in you, Monyumi.”

The words he came out with were unexpectedly sharp.

“This unforeseen unique loop made your weaknesses come to the surface. You can’t do a thing without your brother.”

“Wha...”

Kagurai-senpai’s eyes widened.

“You’re definitely talented. In results alone, you stand a head above any agent sent to any era. You have a strong sense of responsibility towards the mission, and I’ve no complaints with your ability—however.”

He looked at her with the sort of cold eyes as if he was belittling her from the depths of his heart. In his tone as well, I couldn’t feel the slightest hint of warmth.

“If you keep depending on your brother, you’ll be hopeless.”

“I-I’m...”

“If I make a mistake, my brother will correct me. You’re sure of it somewhere in your heart. You might think you’re the one regulating your flippant, irresponsible hopeless big brother, but it’s actually the opposite.”

Kagurai-senpai grit her teeth with a vexed face.

But when her reputation was run through the mud to such an extent, she didn’t return a single word. No... perhaps, she couldn’t.

“Well, don’t be so down, Monyumi.”

He lightly hit his hands together, changing to a cheerful tone.

“The inspection the people up there asked for doesn’t concern whether or not the inspectee is a brocon. You’ve been assigned to a two-man-cell for what it’s worth, so as long as you leave results, your individual capabilities really don’t matter. So that was my personal take on it.”

“.....”

“I’ll be taking my leave. Monyumi. Send your brother my regards.”

He declared as he stepped out of the girls’ room. The sliding screen shut behind him, yet, a heavy stagnant air alone remained in the room. I couldn’t move for a few seconds, but returning to my senses, I chased after the man.

“P-please wait, Shakujii-san!”

I slammed open the screen, and called out to his back walking down the corridor.

“Yes? What’s up, bro? Screamin’ your lungs out like that?”

Hearing his reply, I instantly understood. Shakujii-san was already gone.

The one here at the moment was the owner of the guesthouse. The one I met yesterday... the one I met before the loop began, the owner of Guesthouse Sunflower. What technology did Shakujii-san make use of to transfer his personality into the owner, and from what time had he become him? I didn’t know a single specific, but I could instinctively tell that he was no longer present.

“... No, it’s nothing.”

I said and returned to the room.

Inside sat Kagurai-senpai, leaning her body weight against the wall. It looked like she was hugging her knees in a sulk, but she could just as well have simply collapsed into that position.

“In the end, who was that man?”

“... I told you, a colleague. That’s all there is to it.”

“You seemed especially close for that.”

“Is that how it looked to you? ... Well, I guess he’s not just another colleague.”

Kagurai-senpai made a weak smile and spoke in a weak voice.

“Hiihiko was Gakuta’s close friend.”

“Gakuta-kun’s...”

That stuffed animal man I had always thought of as a character Kagurai-senpai thought up. I heard this morning that Gakuta-kun was actually her brother. Though she didn’t tell me the specifics.

“So some stuff happened. It’s a long story, and one I don’t want to tell, so I’d rather you don’t ask...”

Now wanting to show me her expression, she covered her face. There was no way I could ask her anything, I simply stayed silent.

“... The masked man you met was most likely Hiihiko.”

Eventually, Kagurai-senpai quietly spoke.

“You mean... before he took over the owner’s body, Hiihiko-san’s real body?”

“Yeah. A low voice. A little taller than you. Hair that goes to his shoulders. Testimony that he came from the future... all the information you gave me matches up.”

The masked man I supposedly met on the third time.

I don’t have any memory of it, but if Kagurai-senpai says so, I can only believe.

“Which means that’s one mystery solved.”

“But even with the mystery solved, it didn’t solve a single one of our

problems..."

I had no words.

In the end, I didn't understand a thing. It had all returned to the starting point. What's more, the person who suddenly appeared said whatever he pleased...

"... I'm sorry, Kagoshima. Could you leave me alone for a while?"

She touched a hand to her forehead to hide her face; Kagurai-senpai spoke with a faint voice on the verge of fading away. Without saying anything, without having any idea of what to do, I followed her orders like a machine and quietly left the room.

that was all I could do.

Night came.

The thirteenth first day of training camp was about to reach its end.

By the time I noticed it, Kagurai-senpai had disappeared from the guesthouse. Perhaps she didn't want to see me or Kurisuchan. I considered searching for her, but her plea to "Leave me alone," wouldn't get out of my head, and the night came without me able to do a thing.

Well, while I said it wouldn't get out of my head, as I don't keep my memories, I'm sure I'll have forgotten by the next time around.

That person's mortified face, her fading voice, all of it.

I'll forget, and then the next time.

If that one fails, then the next.

"... It's more troublesome than I thought, this loop."

I slipped off my clothes in the dressing room as I thought over such a thing. No matter how easy a problem may be, when given a time constraint, it is often that humans find themselves unable to think straight. When pressed by time, they might make mistakes they would usually never make.

But that doesn't mean it all works out with infinite time.

That was the pattern this loop took on.

Time was unlimited. That's precisely why you end up thinking, "If this one's no good, I'll just have to do my best the next one." Such a NEET-like notion made it clear there was no future. One must strongly regulate themselves. One must

continue to maintain their motivation.

“Though there’s no use in me thinking about it.”

Let me make it clear. The lead role this time is Kagurai Monyumi.
I... when I don’t keep my memories, I can’t serve as the protagonist.
If she didn’t exist, I wouldn’t even be able to comprehend what was going on.

“.....”

The one thing I figured out: I’m—far too unentwined with the story.
When I was small, I dreamed of suddenly being wrapped up in a mysterious phenomenon; a development where I would save the damsel in distress. Once I was actually dragged into one, I leaned my own powerlessness all too well. To a loathsome extent, I couldn’t do anything.
My sleeping power won’t awaken, I won’t revive any memories from a past life. Or could it be that I’ll conveniently awaken once the climax hits? Or could it be, could it be I have to die once in order to awaken?

“... How idiotic.”

Stripped and naked, I moved from the dressing room to the bath. The bath of Guesthouse Sunflower was a stone open air bath. But it was a little cramped for that, what’s more, it wasn’t separated between men and women. I don’t even have to mention that it was currently the men’s timeslot. When I slid open the glass and stepped outside, the mild chill of a summer night’s wind stroked my skin.
The stone bath surrounded by a wall of bamboo. The steam that rose from the white-tinted bathwater (it’s apparently connected to a hot spring) swayed as it disappeared into the night sky.

“...?”

I was surprised to find it already occupied. Turning their back towards me, submerged in the bathtub. Their head was wrapped in a towel the way a woman might.

Strange. I heard we were the only guests.

For a moment, I wondered if it was the owner, but just a glance told me it wasn’t that stout physique. I could only see the back of their head and neck from here, but that slender neck didn’t belong to the owner.

Rather, that's an incredibly beautiful and sexy nape. I don't want to believe that's a man's. Perhaps a new guest suddenly appeared. Which means, I met this person last loop as well? Ah, but Kagurai-senpai did say it's not a perfect loop, which means, this person might have come to the guesthouse for the first time on the thirteenth iteration...

After thinking that far, I stopped. Just thinking about it's not going to get me anywhere. I took a bit of distance from that person, and got into the bath myself.

"A nice bath, ain't it."

As I entered the bath, the previous occupant struck up conversation. "You're right," I gave a reply that didn't leave anything to linger. I'm sure from here, "So where did you fly in from," we would have a non-lingering conversation... wait, what?

Wait a second. That voice just now was a woman's.

Rather, it's a voice that sounds extremely familiar...

"What's more, tonight... the first day of training camp's a full moon. Being able to look at the moon as you sink into the bath is wonderful. Open air baths are a wonderful thing. Right, Kagoshima?"

With a gentle smile, the one seeking agreement from me was—Kagurai-senpai.

[FANSERVICE]

"KAwSdrftgyFJKlp"

A scream without words leapt from my mouth. I hurriedly turned around, fleeing to the edge of the tip at a tremendous speed.

"Haha. Why are you the one screaming? You sure you don't have it the other way around?"

I heard her laughing voice from behind.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't know you were inside! I was sure this was the men's timeslot... a-anyways, I'm sorry! I'll get out at once!"

"No, it is the men's timeslot right now. You're not wrong. I simply aimed for the men's timeslot to enter the bath."

“... Eh?”

Which means, don’t tell me. Don’t tell me—

I somehow managed to quell my body quivering in shock as I voiced the shocking truth.

“K-Kagurai-senpai, you were a trap the whole time...?”

Hwsssh!

I heard the splash of water behind me.

Did Kagurai-senpai trip?

“W-w-why is that your conclusion, you dimwit!”

“I-I mean, if you purposely aimed to enter in the men’s timeslot, that’s all that...”

“There’s no way I’m a man! I’m a woman!”

“... Oh, thank god.”

I felt relief from the bottom of my heart. Ah, that really is something to be thankful.

If Kagurai-senpai was actually a man, that would be more than an unexpected twist. You could call it a cataclysmic disaster.

“... Good grief, you really are...”

A fed-up voice tinged with a cynical laugh. I somehow managed to respond with my chaotic head.

“No, but... if you’re not a trap, then why did you enter in the men’s timeslot?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I thought I’d take a bath with you.”

In a teasing tone, she casually said something amazing.

“Now, Kagoshima. Get out of that corner, and get closer. Humans need to get to no one another, skin to skin, from time to time.”

Why did it come to this?

No, I'm a man, so I won't say I'm not happy.

When this camp was decided and I learned I'd be living with four women, I'd be lying if I said I didn't fantasize about encountering events where I accidentally peeked on them changing and got told off with, "Kyaah, Akira-san you pervert!" But I didn't desire a lucky pervert event to such an extent.

I wasn't shooting this high.

"What's wrong, Kagoshima. You can get closer than that."

"... No, I'm fine where I am."

I was submerged in the bath around a meter from Kagurai-senpai.

While I was exerting myself not to look as much as possible, I was a healthy male, so I couldn't help but take fleeting side glances.

How should I put it, the lines from her neck down to her shoulders were exquisite. Her face was faintly red, and that also gave a sense of exhilaration. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, the white-tinted bathwater didn't let me worship her entire body, but just the parts that stuck out of it were enough to convey her charm.

Uwah... Kagurai-senpai was actually ridiculously pretty.

"You're too high-strung, Kagoshima. Don't stiffen up like that."

"N-no, I'm a man, so stiffening up in this situation is a biological phenomenon, or rather..."

"Hah?"

"Eh..... ah."

C-crap.

I just made an outrageous misunderstanding!

"... Pff. Ahahahahaha!"

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Kagurai-senpai burst into laughter, raising her voice into an energetic laugh. In my embarrassment, I silently shrunk myself.

"What are you thinking, you pervert. Kukuku... ahahahah!"

"E-erk..."

"Fufu. It's a bit of a fresh feeling to be the one teasing you. You're usually the one always feeling me up."

In a nostalgic, yet somewhat solemn tone, Kagurai-senpai spoke.

“... Umm, why are you doing something like this?”

“Something like this?”

“I’m talking about mixed bathing...”

“Why? Because I felt like it.”

“Felt like it... please don’t let an unmarried girl enter the same bath as a man for a reason like that...”

... No, well, it’s not like I have any qualifications to say that when I got swept up by the slow and didn’t leave myself.

“Once next time comes around, you’ll have forgotten all about it. In that case, isn’t it fine no matter what I do? I thought, and decided to be a bit daring.”

“You’re far too daring...”

She really is manly in that regard.

But I see. Next time, I’ll have even forgotten this mixed bath.

... Can’t we do something about that? Guess not.

Perhaps Kagurai-senpai’s attitude loaded with composure stemmed from that as well. She knew I was going to forget anyways, which let her act this bold.

“Well I am a little embarrassed.”

She laughed to play it off. Was the reddening of her cheeks from the bath, or was she as embarrassed as me? I was unable to make a judgement.

“... I was sure you’d still be depressed.”

Not a few hours ago, Shakujii-san had put her through the wringer, yet she had completely returned to her normal energetic self.

Did acting on her own calm her down?

... She hasn’t gotten her hands on some alcohol, has she?

“Depressed...? Ah, about Hihihiko...”

She said as if she’d just recalled it now.

“Are you alright?”

“... That’s hard to say. Everything Hihihiko said hit the mark, so it’s honestly taking its toll. Despite what I say, I’m always being spoiled by Gakuta.”

Lowering her brow, she made a self-harming smile.

“It’s as you said some time before... I’m a lonely girl.”

“.....”

“I’m a weak person who becomes no good if someone won’t stay by her side. Thinking back on it, this look really was the first time I moved on my own.”

Kagurai-senpai said, with some sarcastic smiles mixed in.

“The moment the loop started, it was harsh, sad, scary, and painful, there was nothing I could do. It was as if I was the only one being left behind by the world, and within all that, I couldn’t bear the fact I had no one to rely on. That’s why... I opened up to you on everything, and sought your help.”

“But talking to the likes of me won’t...”

“Don’t abase yourself. You’ve saved me plenty. Having you as my ally was more reassuring than anything.”

All I did was divert her loneliness ever so slightly, it seems.

It’s not like I managed anything great.

But right now, she said that was enough.

“You’re not my first kiss for nothing, Kagoshima.”

“Eh. Eeh? W-what are you talking about?”

Her sudden statement took me by surprise. Wait a second. I’ve got absolutely no memory of kissing Kagurai-senpai. Wait, I’ve never even experienced a kiss myself!

“Ah, I see. So you don’t know.”

“You did it without me knowing!?”

Eh? When!?

When was that!?

When I was asleep!?

“Well, just forget about it for now. I wanted to try saying it. It’s just a joke.”

Kagurai-senpai tossed that story away quite crudely.

I couldn’t tell if it was a joke or not, but it didn’t look like I would get anymore answers by asking, so I reluctantly agreed.

“... Thinking back, I get the feeling I’m always being saved by you. By your... sinful denseness.”

Kagurai-senpai’s serene eyes gazed at the moon as she went on in a solemn voice.

“Without the slightest look at my—no, our appearances, you looked only at our essence. Titles, and status, missions, and destiny... ignoring each and every one of those complicated, intertwining circumstances, you saw us as simply individual people— treated us as the sort of normal girls you could find anywhere.”

“.....”

Kagurai-senpai spun her words as if talking to herself. Thanks to that, I couldn’t say a single thing back, simply maintaining my silence.

“To Kagoshima, from the very bottom of his heart, our true identities ‘don’t matter’, I’m sure. Without paying mind to what would usually be the first thing one cared about, the ability to ‘not care’ is your bad part... and at the same time, your good point. While seeming as if you’re averting your eyes from us, you truly face us more sincerely than anyone ever could.”

“Wai-wait a second. Please wait.”

I was starting to feel itchy. I stopped those words.

“... Please don’t say such embarrassing things so calmly. Seriously, what’s up with you?”

“Fufufu. I wonder what’s up. Perhaps bathing with you’s risen my spirits.”

An evasive smile.

“... Rather, aren’t you letting off an air like everything’s over? You haven’t resolved anything yet, have you?”

The way to escape the loop was unclear, the culprit was unknown. To take it further, at the point Shakujii-san wasn’t the culprit, it became unclear whether or not there was a culprit in the first place.

The situation was boundlessly hopeless.

“Yeah, you’re right...”

Kagurai-senpai slowly closed her eyes.

“... Well, we can have that discussion next time. In the time we have left today, our possible actions are limited. That’s why... just let me take it easy tonight.”

Her closed eyes slowly opened to look at me.

They were terribly calm eyes. I couldn’t feel any sense of crisis or tension. It was... as if the last inning was already played, she had that sort of serenity. Gazing into her slightly-damp eyes, I had nothing to say in return.

For around ten minutes, we exchanged a conversation so substance-less, it couldn’t even be called idle chatter before, “I should get out,” Kagurai-senpai said.

The sound of falling water arose as she slickly stood from the bath. When she rose from the murky water, naturally, the naked form she had kept hidden was exposed to the open air, and exposed to my eyes while she was at it—

“—Wait, if you’re going to get out, please give me some warning!”

I hurriedly averted my eyes, turning my body around to face the other way. Seriously, what’s up with you, Kagurai-senpai!?

“Haha. My bad, my bad.”

I heard wet footsteps behind me. She was completely out of the bath, it seems.

Which means, she’s completely naked... uwah, uwah... no, well, she was naked the whole time, but... even so... uwah...

As I worried endlessly, a teasing voice came from behind.

“Kagoshima. I don’t mind if you look this way.”

“D-don’t be stupid!”

“It’s fine, I tell you. The steam’s going to cover up all the important parts anyways.”

“The steam doesn’t do its job in real life!”

I felt I really would turn if I let my guard down, so I frantically contained my worldly desires.

Don’t turn, don’t turn... convince yourself this is a back alley in Morioh. If you turn, they’ll drag your soul away. You can’t turn around, you can’t turn around...

“Fufu. Hahahah.”

As a violent battle unfolded with myself, Kagurai-senpai gave an intrigued laugh.

“You really are a wimp who could never turn around at a time like this. Fufu. Well, perhaps’ that’s precisely why I can feel at ease naked with you... and precisely why I—”

She didn’t say those words to the end. The sound of the glass door shutting soon sounded out. It seems she had entered the changing room.

But the sound could be a feint, and it was possible Kagurai-senpai was still loitering around naked, so I waited around ten minutes before turning. Kagurai-senpai was no longer there.

Now along in the open air bath, I let out a deep breath.

“... What was that, back there.”

My spirit was worn out. I get the feeling I was being teased by her from beginning to end.

This sort of hazy something remained in my heart, the inside of my head a muddled mess, but in the end, I’d forget all of today in a few hours.

When I considered that, I didn’t feel like thinking anything. I—stopped thinking.

Chapter 5: Princess Kaguya

45th Loop

The first morning of training camp.

When I opened my eyes, Kagurai-senpai was sitting by my pillow. I didn't know why, but she looked extremely tired.

“... Good morning, forty-fifth Kagoshima.”

And she explained everything in regards to the situation we were enraptured in. The keyword ‘widow’ left me with no choice but to believe her.

“This is the forty-fifth time, and the ones absent from camp this time are Kurisu and Kikyouin...”

Meaning this time’s... the members participating in the forty-fifth training camp were Kagoshima Akira, Kagurai Monyumi, and Orino Shiori.

“What I’ve learned from forty-five repetitions is that the probability of there being fewer members is gradually increasing. From thirty-six onwards, it’s always been two absences...”

Apparently, only Kagurai-senpai and I participated in each and every one of the forty-five iterations.

The two of us were investigating together the whole time, it seems.

But... the results were none too favorable.

No apparent progress.

“... That’s it for the explanation. Kagoshima, we’re continuing on from last time. To make sure we haven’t missed anything, we’ll do another...!”

“K-Kagurai-senpai!”

The moment she tried to stand, her knees buckled, sending her falling towards me as I raised only my torso from the futon. I reflexively held her body up with both hands.

“Are you alright!?”

“... I’m fine. Nothing amiss.”

“Nothing amiss... your face is pale.”

“There’s no way that’s true... every day, my fatigue is all reset when the clock strikes twenty-four. So there’s no way I could be tired...”

Perhaps in theory. At present, not a shred of fatigue remained in me. But... Kagurai-senpai maintained her memories. For forty-five days—a month and a half, she repeated the same day. In a loop that would never advance to tomorrow.

Even if she didn’t accumulate physical fatigue or injury, her spirit accumulated any and everything. As the sickness of the body can start with the mind, it wouldn’t be strange if irregular mental strain brought a negative influence to her body. At present, the girl in my arm had a terrible complexion, her breaths were shallow and short.

Forty five days.

How much pain to her heart had such an empty repetition wrought?

“A-anyways, you should rest this time around! Get yourself in perfect position in preparation for the next one.”

“... Quit making me repeat myself, Kagoshima.”

A powerful look pierced into me. Quit making me repeat myself likely meant that the previous me, and the me before that said something to the same effect.

I couldn’t stand to see Kagurai-senpai in such pain.

“After that dumbass playing elite, Hihihiko... put me through the wringer, like hell I can keep quiet...”

“Hihihiko... oh, are you talking about that Shakujii Hihihiko-san that appeared on the thirteenth?”

I don’t know the specifics, but it looks like coming in contact with Shakujii-san had disturbed her to such an extent.

“Umm, is there any way we can get in touch with Shakujii-san to ask for his help?”

“... The answer to that question is, ‘Hell no’ in two senses of the word. It is impossible to establish contact from our side... the reason being I am unable to utilize the B3 World. And even if we did get in contact with him, I’d rather die

than run teary-eyed to that bastard..."

She said as she unsteadily stood. But a few steps and she soon crumbled once more.

".. Dam, mit."

Her cracked voice groaned in irritation. I hurriedly raced over and held up her body.

"... Kagurai-senpai. Don't push yourself, just rest this time. Okay?"

Kagurai-senpai bit into her lip before nodding.

After I took her to the girls' room, Kagurai-senpai fell sound asleep. It looks like she was amassing mental fatigue after all.

... It's just, when I slid open the screen to the girl's room, I happened to catch Orino-san changing out of her pajamas, getting an eye-full of her undergarments. It was a delightful, embarrassing happening, but with my somber mood, I couldn't enjoy it.

what's more, when I reflexively dodged her, "Kyaah! Akira-san, you pervert," slap, she landed a clean hit on Kagurai-senpai- of hazy consciousness beside me-'s jaw, and I get the feeling that was the finishing blow, but... well, so be it. It's that. You see it all the time in shonen manga. With apprehensions for the sub-character enduring their wounds to make for their place of death, the main character knocks them out with a body blow. It's something like that.

Please, rest in peace, Kagurai-senpai.

"....."

And if you ask what I'm doing, I'm not doing anything.

Kagurai-senpai slept soundly without signs of nightmare, so she didn't' look like she needed nursing. But that didn't mean I got in the mood to play.

I naturally returned to my room, while Orino-san remained in the girls' room. I pushed the futon and low table into a corner, laying out over the space that made, counting the stains on the ceiling much like a maiden greeting her first night. Without any meaning.

I grit my teeth at my own powerlessness, if I put it like that, I might be able to

make it sound cool. I knew I wanted to do something, but I hadn't the slightest inkling of what I should do.

If Kagurai-senpai wasn't here, forget resolving the problem, I wouldn't even be able to grasp it. What's more, if I did anything unnecessary, there was a danger of worsening it.

I was unable to do anything to a detestable extent.

Perhaps this isn't the first time I've been tormented by my incompetence like this. Every time, I must have come face to face with it, regretted, reflected, and without changing the result, I'd open my eyes to the next one as if nothing had happened at all.

What emptiness.

It happened as I was wrapped in such feelings of self-loathing and self-harm.

"K-Kagoshima-kun."

From outside the room came Orino-san's slightly high-pitched voice.

"C-can I come in?"

I got up and told her to go ahead.

The screen immediately slid open—taking me aback.

I think my mouth was idiotically hung open. There's no doubt I ended up making a considerably blockheaded face. Well, I doubt I could help it. I mean, as Orino-san entered the room... she was in her swimsuit.

A bikini. Her abundant torso was unsparingly exposed. I was sure the phrase, stuck out in all the right places, was a word made for her.

[IMAGE]

With her face bright red, Orino-san forcefully closed the screen behind her. She made for me with fast feet and sat. Her hands hid her chest or covered her hands, her eyes swimming all around, she looked like she was quite busy on her own.

"D-don't just stand there, say something..."

In my mute amazement, Orino-san spoke bashfully.

"U-umm..."

"N-never mind, please don't say anything."

So which is it?

A peculiar silence it was hard to put a shape on seeped into the room. Unable to keep up with the situation, I matched Orino-san and sat on the floor.

“... What’s wrong, Orino-san?”

I said, unable to endure the silence.

“... Umm, uh... Kagurai-senpai’s in bed, so playing at the beach and stuff, it’s not that mood anymore... but I went to the trouble of buying a new swimsuit, so I wouldn’t want this to end without me having a chance to wear it...”

Her face turned redder and redder, she used her hand to pin down her navel.

“And... Kagurai-senpai said..... -kun’s name in her sleep...”

“She’s sleepalking? Did she say something?”

“... N-nothing at all!”

To summarize, she wanted to wear her new swimsuit. I guess girls really do want to throw on the clothes they’ve just bought. No, but still, taking another look at her, a swimsuited Orino-san’s charms could only be expressed in my pitiful vocabulary by the word, ‘dayum’.

Not at the beach or a pool, a beautiful swimsuited girl in a tatami-lain Japanese-styled room gave off a perverse fascination I couldn’t put into words.

I can’t think of a clever metaphor, but... maybe that.

Like when a mature lady puts on a school uniform...

“... You’re thinking something strange.”

“N-not at all!”

Glared at with cold eyes, I frantically waved my hand. In all actuality, I wasn’t thinking anything perverted, but I was thinking something strange, making me act terribly suspicious.

“Um... it looks good on you.”

“T-thanks. Y-you don’t think I’m... a-a-a-pervert, do you?”

“I don’t think so,” I hurriedly denied. “You just wanted to wear your new swimsuit! I get it!”

“... Yeah. There’s that too...”

“But there’s something else?”

“Back there, Kagoshima-kun... you saw me, um, changing, right?”

“Ah... yeah.”

“Back there, your reaction was far lighter than I expected... it was a bit of a shock, a bit irritating.”

“You’re worried about that!?”

Kagurai-senpai was in pain back there, so I couldn’t react well, and if I had to say, my thoughts were turning towards, “Hey, read the mood a bit, Orino-san,” I’ll admit it!

But come to think of it, perhaps I’m at fault for looking at a girl’s undergarments without providing her with a decent reaction.

Anyways, I must follow through!

“You’re wrong about that, Orino-san. Sure enough, my reaction was light back there, but that’s because the heat didn’t escape from the thermos. I was actually boiling hot inside. Your underwear, black both top and bottom, what’s more, the lace made it look like you were going all out; I saw it all, and burned it into my brain in such detail I can describe the patterns on them to a great decree of accuracy, so don’t worry—”

I was slapped.

At three times the speed of when I saw her changing, it was impossible to avoid. Hmm. Girls are hard.

But if there’s one thing I understood, when Orino-san said, “G-god. Kagoshima-kun, you really are a pervert,” she was transcendentally cute.

“I’m sorry.”

“... Don’t apologize.”

“Then thank you most kindly.”

“That’s even worse!”

“... Haha.”

“Fufu.”

For no real reason, we exchanged a laugh.

I finally understood. Orino-san quite likely came to cheer me up. Right after I heard Kagurai-senpai’s expression, I must have been making quite a dark face. While she didn’t understand the situation, Orino-san came to pep me. Well, I get the feeling her service spirit is a bit too vigorous, mind you.

“Thank you, Orino-san.”

This time, I expressed gratitude without the jokes.

“Mn.”

Without getting angry, Orino-san gave a small nod.

Ah, come to think of it, out of the ComClub members, the one I've known longest is Orino-san. It was only a difference of a few months, but I met her sooner than any of the others.

Perhaps that's why.

It felt so nostalgic to be with her, as if we had known each other from childhood.

No...

Is that so? Is that really so?

Ten years ago.

What could be called my roots, the chance encounter at Gentle Breeze Park.

The lady in the strange suit.

That lady's face... resembled Orino-san's, didn't it?

Huh?

Strange. How strange.

Why am I paying attention to something like that?

Usually... the usually me would never mind such a thing. There's no way I'd notice.

“Ahaha, but you know.”

Her face still a little red, not noticing the change in me, Orino-san continued on.

“Kagoshima-kun, you prefer it when I wear a T-shirt, right?”

I shuddered.

Fear raced down my spine. As she smiled sweet as a honeycomb, undoubtedly saying it as a joke, I ended up seeing something terribly ominous in her. I certainly did hold the opinion that, ‘wearing a T-shirt over a swimsuit is contrarily more sexy’. But I'd never said it to Orino-san... no, let me be more precise. I haven't said it this time... the forty-fifth time.

Meaning she maintains her memories?

Like Kagurai-senpai—

“H-huh... What’s wrong, Kagoshima-kun? You suddenly went quiet.”

“... Orino-san.”

“W-what?”

Her expression turned fearful. From her atmosphere, I knew I was wrong. The impression she gave off was... different from Kagurai-senpai. I could only explain it as a ‘something’, a vague ambiguous difference, but it was definitely different. She was simply coping with this loop.
That’s right. This feeling is the same as back then.
When Orino-san first met my childhood friend.
It’s similar to when she met Kai.
This sensation that Orino-san alone is off from the world.
Thanks to that, a discrepancy was born between my recognition and her’s.

“O—Orino-san?”

“Yes? What is it?”

Before her perplexed face, I hesitated. I hesitated and hesitated, and at the end, “Don’t you think you should put on some clothes? You’ll catch a cold.” I told a lie.

“Ah, sure. You’re right.”

Orino-san nodded and left the room. The screen closed quietly behind her.

“.....”

I couldn’t say it.

When she didn’t know anything... when she didn’t notice her own abnormality, I was unable to thrust it at her.

That wasn’t like me at all, I thought.

For me to tell a lie and cover up the truth, that was something I’d never done before.

It’s a full moon tonight.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say a full moon again. This was surely the

forty-fifth full moon.

Soaking down to my shoulders in the white-tinted open-air bath, I gazed at the night sky alone. The full moon floating without a cloud in the sky was a beautiful sight to behold.

And yet, my feelings wouldn't clear.

It's not like anything happened in particular. And the forty-fifth first day was about to end without anything happening. Perhaps the situation was far more severe than I had imagined.

An endlessly repeating loop.

Where time was unlimited, I thought the greatest problem would be maintaining motivation.

But maybe that wasn't the case.

A problem that made motivation, mental stress and the like seem inconsequential, a problem coming from a completely different vector had barged in.

Orino-san was acting strange.

And... so was I.

As I don't maintain my memories, I can't tell from when we started acting strange, but the fact Kagurai-senpai didn't say anything about us meant there was a high probability this one was the first.

Something was crumbling.

What we had all treasured and protected, that vague, abstract... something. If this loop continued, I got the feeling we would reach a point from which there was no turning back.

“... Dammit.”

In the depths of my chest, an anger started to well up towards my own impatience. No, it was a little different from anger. I was simply bewildered by a sensation I had never felt before.

“I wonder what's wrong with me...”

This was the first time I ever felt so irritated. An unfamiliar anxiety leaned indefinitely on both shoulders. If had had to keep it simple... I was troubled. At the end of the rope.

“... Do something about this.”

My voice naturally came out.
Feeling as if I was praying to god, I pleaded help from the most reliable person I knew.
For some reason... I got the feeling he could do something about it.
There was very little in this world he was incapable of.

“Help me out here, Kai.”

“I didn’t do anything this time around, nor do I intend to. I’m a complete member of the peanut gallery, meaning my plan is to enjoy this story as but a single reader.”

A rolling sound.

From behind, I heard the glass door open.

“This incident Kagoshima Akira’s party has encountered, put favorably, a midsummer dream, and put poorly, a low-brow comedy. It was simple enough to infiltrate this closed world, but it looks like it’ll resolve itself even if I leave it be, so I very much intend to watch it to its conclusion without lifting a finger.”

I understood that a transparent voice had seeped into the night sky.
That voice gradually grew closer.

“Unlike Akira, I don’t have that much free time.”

But you know, he said.

“If you beg me in such a sad voice, there’s no way I wouldn’t make the trip.”

I turned.
Gray hair close to white... and white skin as if it rejected the sun’s radiance.
He had a surprisingly beautiful body. While it was a delicate figure I wouldn’t call strong by any means, neither did it give off a feeble feel. Like a tempered sword, I felt a supple strength.

My childhood friend, Shinose Kai.
Made his appearance buck naked.

“... D-Dragoon MS (Metal Storm) Ultimate Version!”
“Drakensberg. A region encompassing the Republic of South Africa’s central

plateau."

"..... I-I've got nothing."

"Yep. It's my win."

The game of concentration we started on a whim as we soaked in the bath ended at my complete failure.

"U... uwaaaaaaah"

I just normally lost!

What's up with that!?

When I was just barely within the rules, or rather, completely breaking them, I lost fair and square. What's more, all of Kai's answers were intellectual. It made me look like a brat for saying nothing but Beyblade bit beasts.

"With Beyblade's Dragoon as an exception, in Japanese fantasy-type literary productions, Dragoons are often knights who ride dragons, or warriors who fight alongside them, but the original meaning differs. They were indeed soldiers who fought alongside dragons, so it might sound misleading, but the dragon in this instance was a name given to a weapon that breathed fire like the dragons of legend. Meaning they were a horseback cavalry equipped with firearms, and not knights who mounted dragons."

He even ended it spouting miscellaneous trivia. So this is what it means to be at someone's mercy. Seeing me seep deeper into the water breathing contrary bubbles, Kai smiled.

"Thinking back, this is the first time we've ever taken a bath together."

"That's because you would never come over to my house. I invited you time and again."

"I've got some circumstances."

"I want to play a whole load of things with you."

"Right. I'll pray that the day comes."

Softly parrying my words, Kai gazed at the sky with sentimental eyes. He came to this guesthouse by pure coincidence, apparently. The place he just happened to drop by in the midst of his journey to find himself was Guesthouse Sunflower, apparently.

Well, it's a small world, so those coincidences can happen.

“Come to think of it, what’ve you been up to lately? We haven’t met this past week, have we.”

“You had your time filled with remedial lessons. I was—playing with Saijou Mutsuki.”

“With Saijou-kun?”

Saijou-kun was a boy around middle school age I met the other day. He wore glasses, looked childish, and said something incomprehensible about wanting to meet the founder of a movie club or something.

“You’re acquainted with Saijou-kun too?”

“I can’t say we’re acquainted. He doesn’t know who I am. So more specifically, I was using Saijou Mutsuki to play.”

“Hmm. I don’t really get it.”

“If you don’t get it, that’s fine.”

“Yeah. It doesn’t really matter if I get it or not.”

The same old exchange between the two of us.

“It seems Saijou Mutsuki looks up to you.”

“Me?”

Did I have any cool traits someone would look up to?

“It might be closer to say he’s jealous. Whatever the case, it seems like he wants to get along with all sorts of women like you do.”

“Oh, that? ... Any man would think so.”

“You have a point.”

Bitter and sweet, he formed his usual smile.

“It’s boring to be the only one talking. Akira, what’s your story been like?”

Kai drew his face close. A wave rose in the bathwater, spreading ripples to the edge.

“When you’re staying buddy buddy under the same roof as four beautiful women, such a dream-like situation, why are you making such a gloomy face?”

“.....”

I silently averted my eyes from Kai, sinking a bit further into the water.

I didn't know why I was so gloomy either. The loop, Kagurai-senpai's health, Orino-san, and myself. There were so many things to think about, I didn't know where to start.

But it's not like I could throw that all at Kai.

The fact that time is looping isn't something one could believe so easily.

And if I told him the senpai of the club I'm affiliated with was actually a time traveler, I'd be the one treated like a crazy person...

"... Fufu. Haha, hahahah."

When I thought deeply, Kai rose his voice into an uncontrollable laugh.

"W-what's wrong?"

"Haha. Sorry, sorry. I just thought you were thinking something that missed the mark to a hopeless extent as per usual."

"... Are you perhaps making fun of me?"

"I'm admiring you."

"No, I think that line was considerably mocking."

"I've never made fun of you in my life. That's the truth, you know?"

If there's something you can't talk about, just tell me what you can, Kai said, so I went right ahead and spoke about my feelings. Without saying a single specific, what's more, I just said whatever came to mind without my thoughts in order, so I think it became a considerably cryptic explanation; yet as per usual, he made a smile as if he had seen through it all.

"And then?"

Kai said, once I'd finished speaking.

"And then... that's the whole story."

"Don't lie. I can tell when you're lying, Akira. There's still something you want to get off your chest, isn't there?"

"....."

He gazed into me with his deep, gentle eyes, and pulled up my true thoughts.

"I get the feeling... Kagurai-senpai already knows everything."

She knows, but she averts her eyes.

No, she averts her eyes, so she can never know.

I get the feeling she's gotten something wrong in a fundamental part of the problem.

I feel excessively so.

"... Ah, sorry. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you."

I hurriedly apologized, but Kai thought a bit.

"... You're the same as always. That ability of yours to see through to the true nature of things... no, your power to only see the true nature"

He said. He slowly raised his head and gazed at the moon in the sky.

"Hey, Akira. What do you think Princess Kaguya was thinking?"

Kai suddenly changed the topic.

"Princess Kaguya...? You mean the girl found in the stalk of bamboo?"

I read the picture book when I was a kid, but I only remembered the general outline. As I recall, the original story had her quarrelling in her married life, but my knowledge in that field is vague at best.

All I know is that she was originally a resident of the moon, and at the end, she had to return to it.

"As long as you know that, that's enough."

Kai spoke.

"Princess Kaguya was aware that she was of the other world. While knowing she would someday have to return to the moon, she hid her identity and continued to act as if she were that she was a person of this country. Forget the affections of the men she drew, she even deceived the parents who raised her. Don't you think she's quite the grand villainess?"

"I think... you're wrong about that."

I refuted without any basis.

It was rare, but I had no choice but to refute.

“I’m sure Princess Kaguya started to have fun.”

That’s why she couldn’t bring herself to say it to the very end.
If you want to frame her as evil, that might mean she deceived them.
She might have told a lie.
But the time Princess Kaguya spend with the old man and woman was definitely not a lie.

“Just what I’d expect from you.”

Said he with a bitter and sweet smile.

“Just what could be going through her head, I wonder.”

The her Kai spoke of.
Who he was pointing to, I had no id—

— Huh?

A person of another world. Eventually has to return. Hides their identity.
Deceives everyone. Isn’t that... signifying Kagurai-senpai?
Then the fact he brought up Princess Kaguya at that timing means... Kai knows her identity? Wait a second. Come to think of it, I ended up going with the flow and accepting it, but there’s no way something as convenient as Kai coincidentally stopping by the guesthouse we just happened to be in could ever realistically happen.
Is it alright for those manga-esque encounter rates to make their way to reality?
In the back of my head, my suspicious simmered up.
When I began noticing the abnormal nature of my childhood friend, bap, he lightly rested his hand on my head.

“You’re breaking character.”

Kai grabbed my head and fixed me in place. He brought his face close enough to kiss me and gazed into both my eyes.

“That’s not like you, Akira. When I say something incomprehensible, you’re supposed to let it slide as incomprehensible babble. ‘Eh? What was that?’ or ‘Mn? Did you say something?’ or ‘Thanks to that sudden gust of wind, your voice didn’t reach my ears,’ it can be anything, just conveniently play it off. Isn’t that who Kagoshima Akira is?”

“Ka... i...”

“This is definitely because Kagurai Monuyumi came out. Even if it’s one out of four, it looks like noticing the truth has begun crumbling that special little character of yours.”

“.....”

“I was right to keep watch over you. Change of plans. If I leave things be, eventually, either Kagurai Monyumi or the Cage of Death Remnant will resolve this closed work, but I can’t let this go on. Having Akira notice is too great of a loss.”

That’s why... I’ll accelerate the story a bit.

Said Kai.

The glare in his eyes transfixed me like a frog staring into the eyes of a snake.
Aaah...

Now that I’ve noticed one out of four I can tell.

I’ve met this Shinose Kai a number of times as well.

Scary, yet somewhat sorrowful, the sublime World of Death.

“You don’t have to worry about a thing, Akira. I’ll lend you a helping hand. So just close your eyes for a bit.”

Unable to go against his words, I closed my eyes like a marionette.

Right ever, I could tell something around me was crumbling without a sound.
This is, this sensation as if the world is bending out of place—

“My 《Finishing Stroke》 is... put bluntly, an invincible skill. A grand, absolute power to overturn the world, what’s more, due to its nature, it doesn’t have any particular limits. So it has no weaknesses.”

From his tone of voice, I understood well that it wasn’t a brag or exaggeration. More so, the opposite. His voice was terribly pessimistic, terribly self-deprecating. This man held no pride or attachment to the ability he possessed. It even felt like he held it in disgust.

“But you know, Akira. While my ability has no weak points, I can’t say the same for my plan.”

“.....”

“My plan to make the 《Neverending Prologue》does have one fatal flaw.”

A fatal flaw?

I reflexively repeated.

“... And why are you telling me that?”

“Because I’m one of those kind enemy characters from manga and anime who’ll arbitrarily say everything about themselves and reveal their weaknesses even when no one asked.”

Kai chided, though “Kidding,” he immediately revoked that statement

“I’m sure even Saijou Mutsuki could notice this flaw. It’s far too fundamental of a mistake, at this point it’s even idiotic to try covering up. If you were to prick at that weak point, then I’d crumble defeated all too easily, but that’s also in itself, what I desire.”

“.....”

“All that aside, that’s a conversation for a little further down the line. For now, instead of the princess in the cage, you should go off and save your Princess Kaguya.”

Now.

Let’s return to the usual Akira.

《Finishing Stro—

“Oh shut it.”

Said I.

“One-sidedly dragging along a conversation is your bad habit.”

I opened my eyes.

Without averting them from those inhuman pupils before me, I returned the glare.

I face my childhood friend who'd shown his true colors head on.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’ll let things go your way this time. While as always, I don’t understand a single thing you just said, letting things go your way sounds like it’ll save Kagurai-senpai faster— but let me tell you one thing.”

On the verge of noticing everything,
I cried sour grapes as hard as I could.

“Don’t think we’ll be dancing to your tune forever.”



Kai opened his eyes wide, making a surprised face.

“... Remnants of the 《Book Marker》...? No, could it be this is—”

He grimaced just a bit, but quickly, his mouth curved into a smile. A somewhat intrigued smile.

“You’re breaking character too hard, Akira. I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

《Finishing Stroke》

“I get the feeling... Kagurai-senpai already knows everything.”

“.....”

Half-ignoring my words, Kai rose from the bathwater. The pale skin was exposed to the open air. He quietly closed his eyes.

“Was it for I fell, asleep whilst yearning for her, that she did stop by? Had I known it was a dream, I would not have woken up.”

In a voice that penetrated the atmosphere, Kai sung to himself. No, that was five, seven, five, seven, seven, so a tanka poem, perhaps? In that case, would it be more precise to say recited rather than sang?

“Ono no Komachi’s Love song, from the Kokin Wakashu collection.”

He opened his eyes, and looked at me as he spoke.

“It’s a famous poem that was chosen as one of the cards in the Hundred Cards Hundred Poets game. Didn’t you learn it in classic literature?”

“... Why did you suddenly bring it up?”

“I just got into the mood for a reading. Ah, if you want, why don’t you try delivering that song to this Kagurai-senpai of yours?”

“Eh? Why?”

“When I heard the story, I was certain that song fit her perfectly. So it’s a present.”

Presenting a poem...

I get the feeling that’s real cold, but I guess it’s fine.

“Since when were you such a pompous prick?”

“You should try acting a bit cooler, Akira. Especially in front of girls.”

By the time I noticed it, Kai was gone.
I thought he planned to stay at the guesthouse, but from what I got from the owner, we were the only guests here. He was always an elusive man, so it wasn't particularly surprising if he suddenly disappeared at this point.
Knowing of Kai's absence, I made for the girls' room. I passed by Orino-san on her way to the bath, so Kagurai-senpai was in the room alone. Having rested a day, her complexion had improved considerably.
And,

"Was it for I fell, asleep whilst yearning for her, that she did stop by? Had I known it was a dream, I would not have woken up."

I recited the poem Kai entrusted me as is.

"..."

Raising her upper body from the futon, after a moment's blank expression, Kagurai-senpai closed her eyes with a grave countenance. It seems she was reflecting on the poem's meaning.

"From your... childhood friend, to me?"

"Yes."

"And who is this childhood friend...?"

"Who knows."

I tilted my head.

"Umm, Kagurai-senpai, did you get what that means?"

"I told you, didn't I? There was a time I got hooked on the Hundred Poet Hundred Card game, and I know the meaning of all the poems."

"No, first I'm hearing of it."

"... Ah, I see. I didn't tell you this time."

Kagurai-senpai gave a troubled laugh and went silent.
To her unreliable form, I resolved myself and opened my mouth.

"Kagurai-senpai. You already know everything, don't you?"

Without a response, ten, twenty seconds passed. When thirty seconds were about to pass by, "... Soon," an isolated word leaked out.

“Soon, we should experience a pattern where it’s just me and you, the two of us at this training camp. When the time comes... I’ll tell you everything.”

Kagurai-senpai looked straight at me. There was no longer any panic or hesitation in her eyes.

They were eyes of resolve.

Was the poem the trigger, or did she really know everything from the start? I was unable to decide. But it did seem the story was soon to end.

As if someone pressed the fast-forward button, it was all reaching its resolution at a breakneck pace.

Chapter 6: Dreams She can Wake From, and Those She Cannot

50th Loop

The first morning of training camp.

Without being awoken by anything in particular, I naturally opened my eyes.

“... So training camp starts today.”

Our ComClub made use of summer break to go on a three-night, four-day training camp. But just before we took off, Orino-san, Kikyouin-san and Kurisuchan couldn’t come due to urgent business, so it was only Kagurai-senpai and I, the two of us.

Thinking about it calmly, with a majority dropping out, it would be normal to postpone or perhaps cancel the training camp, but I have no idea why it came to this.

“Good morning, Kagoshima.”

As if she had aimed for it... almost as if she had a perfect grasp of the exact time I’d open my eyes, Kagurai-senpai entered without knocking.

“Good morning. You could at least knock, Kagurai-senpai.”

I gave a cynical morning greeting.

“As promised, I’ll tell you everything.”

Kagurai-senpai ignored me and spoke with a serious face. Clad in a tense air, she grasped the small low-table I’d pushed to the side to lay out the futon with both hands.

Silently, she held the low-table high above her head, building up ample centrifugal force, and towards the window looking out at the sea... she tossed it. Tossed it!?

“Eeeeeeeeeeh!?”

As I exclaimed, the low-table followed the law of inertia and collided with the window. Raising an exuberant din, the glass shattered to pieces. The glass fragments and table abided by universal gravitation, falling outside of the guesthouse.

“W-what are you doing, Kagurai-senpai!? Is it stress!? Did the stress get to you!? Longing for Yutaka Ozaki!? Admiring Hoshi Ittetsu!?”

I closed in and yelled at her, but she stayed calm as ever. Far too cool for me to even imagine her as a person who committed a crime.

“Follow me, Kagoshima.”

While I was on the verge of panic, she pulled me by the hand and led me out. She slid the door closed behind us. And opened it again.

“Have a look.”

“No, quit taking things so carefree, and... eh?”

A moment ago, I had been driven to raise an undignified scream, but this time I couldn't find it in me to do even that, I was at a loss for doors. The scene that unfolded beyond the opened doorway was more than abnormal enough to steal my words away.

“You see it all the time in anime and manga.”

To the side of my confusion, Kagurai-senpai flowingly linked her words.

“A somewhat violent retort unleashes in a gag scene, the furniture is destroyed, or the classroom window shatters, a gargantuan lump might form on a person's head, they might spout a nose bleed, but in the next scene as if nothing had happened at all, it all returns to normal.”

That's a presentation only permissible because of a fictional world. A presentation impossible in reality.

“Would it be easier to understand with games? In RPGs, the hero can enter a villager's house, and go around breaking all the pots and barrels, right? The objects stay destroyed as long as the hero is in the house, but once they step out and enter again, the objects have restored as if they had never been smashed.”

Though the items inside them aren't made to regenerate, she added on. That's right. This scene presently expanding before me truly was that game concept.

Once the screen was closed and opened again, it had all returned to normal. The window glass as pretty as ever, the low-table sat meekly in a corner of the room.

In the moment I took off my eyes, it had all been restored to its original state.

"Come so far, I finally understand. The same thing happened on the third time. You might not remember it, but in the third loop, I kicked down the screen to this room. We're going to loop anyways, so what does it matter if I break it, I thought."

"....."

"But that broken screen was back as it was before twenty-four came around. I let it slide back then, but come so far, I finally understand. Wherever the five of us aren't watching, autonomous repairs are taking place. 'Here', if you break what isn't meant to be broken, it will automatically be repaired, it seems."

I didn't understand a thing. I couldn't follow the situation in the slightest.

But Kagurai-senpai ignored me and spoke.

"This is a virtual world."

"... A virtual world?"

"It's a little different from the B3 World. It's not online. A 'closed world' created for the sole sake of shutting us in."

And there, the serious expression she kept to that point crumbled away, she showed a bright smile.

"Now then, Kagoshima. It's our long-awaited training camp. Let's play to our hearts' content!"

"Eeh!? W-wait a tic! Suddenly showing me that, and saying it's a virtual world... what's more, loop and third time, what are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you by and by. But first, how about we enjoy the training camp? The

first day of our camp together?"

Kagurai-senpai seemed to have enough composure to spare. She was engendering an atmosphere as if everything was over.

"Alright. Let's start with a swim. I'll change into a swimsuit, so stay where you are."

No matter what I said, she abandoned me and returned to her own room. Along the way, "Ahh, that's right," she turned in recollection.

"It's possible my resolve might dull before I get to it, so I'll start by saying it proper—Kagoshima."

Kagurai-senpai spoke.

Her face turning a little red, she seemed to be having just a little difficulty getting the words out.

"I love you."

We started at the beach.

"...Kagurai-senpai, if she's just standing there without saying anything, she really is beautiful."

"That's the first thing you say when you see my game swimsuit..."

"Hah! I-I'm sorry! My thoughts ended up leaking!"

"Oy, what does humanity call this feeling born in one's chest that doesn't fall under any spectrum of human emotion?"

"Umm, well if you start by unclenching your fist, I'm sure the world will be just a little more peaceful."

"... Hmph. If that's what you're going to say, I'll shut my mouth. I'll be as quiet as a silent heroine."

"Ah, please don't sulk."

Next, we ate lunch at a nearby restaurant.

"Kagoshima, tell me what sort of food you like."

"Mnn, well I generally like anything that enters my mouth."

"Then what do you hate?"

“Mnn, well I generally like anything that enters my mouth.”

“... I doubt there’s any man in the world less worth cooking for.”

“Come to think of it, Kagurai-senpai, can you cook?”

“No way, no how.”

“That’s actually refreshing.”

The meal was followed by a walk on the coast.

“Does your name... Akira have some origin story to it?”

“No, I hear my dad got caught up in a burst of inspiration and tacked it on without any forethought. Don’t you think it’s kinda badass to get the name Akira from ‘give up’? was his mindset, apparently.”

“... That’s quite a father you’ve got there.”

“On my fifteenth birthday, he came to me in tears saying, ‘I’m really sorry...’ so I don’t pay it any mind anymore.”

“On the contrary, isn’t that harsher!?”

When night came, the two of us wore yukatas, and set off some fireworks.

“Are you sure about this? The plan was to use the fireworks on the night of the last day.”

“It’s fine. To me, this is something like the last day. Live a little.”

“Owah! Hey, don’t point fireworks at people!”

“Wahaha. Kagoshima’s got cold feet... mn? U-uwah! W-what’s happening!?”

“Kagurai-senpai! That’s one of the ones you’re not supposed to hold!”

“S-save me, Kagoshimaaa!”

“Don’t point it this way!”

And like that, the two of us enjoyed our two-person training camp to the fullest.

It was almost as if we were lovers.

By the time we lit the sparklers to finish off the firework show, I had just about received the end of her explanation.

“Once you know what’s happening,, it’s simple.”

Dropping her gaze to the sparkler in her hand, Kagurai-senpai continued her

explanation. She was wearing a white yukata decorated by blue violets in bloom. That form that gave off a vibrant, cool impression made her feel far more sensual than usual.

The yukata we were wearing were ones Kagurai-senpai had prepared. In this virtual world, if one felt like it, they could draft up garments at will, it seems.

“This world was never set in a loop. The five of us dragged into a virtual world were merely experiencing the same day again and again.”

“So rather than a loop, it was save and load.”

“You got it. It was only natural that I was unable to dive into the B3 World. I was already digitized, so there’s no way I ever could.”

“... No, but I still find it hard to believe we’re in a digital world.”

I said as I looked around. A black sea as if it had taken in the darkness of the sky, the sandy beach that changed shape each time the waves pushed up against it. The full moon floating in the stars. The feel of the wind on my skin. The scent of salt. The faint light of the sparklers and the smell of gunpowder. These were all the happenings of a virtual world.

“Your brain is just directly picking it up instead of going through sensory organs. The world a human imagines is the world recognized by their brain. In our era, we’ve roughly unravelled all the mechanisms of the brain. Once it became possible to manipulate the brain, creating a world not in the slightest bit different from reality was simple.”

The reason Kagurai-senpai maintained her memories was because she was someone from the future, it seems. All those from her era would have nanomachines injected into their bodies to manage their physical condition, and diving into the B3 World made use of those nanomachines as well, it seems.

Those nanomachines revolted against this closed world.

“Then since we’re not time travelers... how did Orino-san, Kikyouin-san, Kurisuchan and I come to this virtual world?”

“Even without nanomachines, if you have the right equipment, it’s possible to dive into a virtual world. At present, your bodies in reality should be snoring loudly with a special patch stuck to your heads.”

Like the headgear you often find in SF works, perhaps?

“Umm... so to summarize, when the first day of training camp ended, the five of us were sent into a virtual world and made to repeat the first day over and over again? But there are loads of people apart from us here.”

“If I had to say, they’re NPCs. Their speech merely follows a program.”

“But they don’t say the same thing if you keep talking to them.”

“The technology’s completely different from the games of this era. Don’t group them together. I mean to say that imitations of the humans we came in contact with on the first day of camp made an appearance. If you talked to them a few hours, I’m sure a defect would come out, but the probability of that level of interaction is infinitely low.”

Sure enough, I did spot people here and there, but I didn’t talk to all of them—two or three at most—and we only exchanged a few words.

“That would also explain how Hihihiko was able to impersonate the owner. It’s not that he took over the owner’s personality. He was simply controlling the owner’s NPC. I finally understand what he meant when he said this was an exception.”

This Shakuji Hihihiko fellow, in the midst of observing Kagurai-senpai, saw that we had entered a virtual world on this training camp, and slipped in himself... Kagurai-senpai surmised.

“Kagurai-senpai...”

Her explanation wrapped up, I asked. I had no choice but to ask. It would normally be the first thing I’d talk to her about, but it was the topic I’d been avoiding all the way.

“Who did this to us?”

Between us, our two sparklers dropped their last sparks.

“I did.”

Kagurai-senpai said quietly. On her mouth was a slightly-self-abasing smile. From her air, I had a vague idea already, it wasn’t that surprising.

“The culprit was me.”

The protagonist this time is Kagurai Monyumi.

And the antagonist is also Kagurai Monyumi.

“Now then. Where should I start... Kagoshima. Do you remember how I take care of all the Computer Club’s activities by myself?”

“Yes.”

“As part of those activities, I produced an artificial intelligence.”

“Artificial intelligence?”

“Its name was ‘AMLO’. To grant its owners wishes before it had been asked, the ideal helper program. Even if you don’t set the alarm every morning, to surmise the appropriate waking hour from your schedule and get you up. To tell you when the release date for the manga you’re collecting is close. It was that sort of maid-like program.”

Though it’s the second time I’m telling you this, Kagurai-senpai laughed. Naturally, I didn’t remember it.

“But... the artificial intelligence I produced was unexpectedly proficient and unexpectedly selfish, it seems. AMLO read my deeper psyche, and granted my desires when I never even thought to ask.”

Which means the real culprit would be that artificial intelligence. Though with her strong sense of responsibility, it did seem Kagurai-senpai was sure it was herself.

“And what was your desire?”

“I presume it’s the wish I thought up on the first night of training camp. Broadly speaking, there were two..”

As she said that, Kagurai-senpai stood and began walking across the sand. I followed along.

“The first was, ‘If only this time would continue forever’. That one is simple. And that wish was the one that produced this looping situation.”

If only this time would continue forever, eh
I was thinking something similar.

“How ironic for the result to be a loop.”

“In essence, AMLO’s pretty much run amuck. I’m sure that part’s rather

arbitrary.”

“And what was the other one?”

When I pushed her on, Kagurai-senpai answered in a small voice.

“... That one relates to why someone other than us is always absent with each loop.”

“Hmhmm. And what sort of wish was it?”

“.....”

“Kagurai-senpai?”

“It was ‘..... lone.....’”

“Say what?”

“~~! ‘I want to go to the beach alone with Kagoshima’!”

Kagurai-senpai cried out with a bright-red face. I was taken aback.

“... Umm, no why would you make that wish?”

“I-I told you, didn’t I... that I... I-love you...”

“R-right...”

My face grew hotter. Both our faces red, we averted our eyes.

No, what’s with this air. It’s so embarrassing, I think I’ll die. Surely feeling even more embarrassed than me, Kagurai-senpai rapidly began walking ahead on her own.

“You get it now, don’t you! Each and every time, a different member is absent because AMLO deciphered that wish, and used it to influence this world!”

She rapidly shot out the words.

“The reason we weren’t alone in one go, the reason the numbers go down with each new loop, is because AMLO took into consideration the contradiction between these two wishes, I’m sure!”

The contradiction between them.

To be together with everyone forever. To be alone with the person you love.

“Ah, god, I’ll just explain the rest at once!”

Not daring to look my way, Kagurai-senpai walked down the beach as she shouted out. I chased after her back as I listened to her story.

The artificial intelligence AMLO manipulated Gakuta-kun's body to stick the patches on us, apparently. Gakuta-kun was currently connected to her computer for repairs. Rummaging through the various pieces of equipment Kagurai-senpai had brought for body repairs, it pieced together a device to let us dive into the virtual world.

... But I'm sure the sight of Gakuta-kun piecing together machinery in the dead of the night was quite a surreal one indeed.

"It can't be helped that Hihihiko called me out. This time was completely my error. Just deserts with myself as the chef, using alts to comment on my own post..."

Tired of her fast walk, Kagurai-senpai stopped her feet and gazed at the sky. Thanks to that, I finally caught up to her side.

"... I was lonely."

A faint voice that might be stolen away by the night wind.

"You might not remember, but on the very first, the first night of training camp before the loop began, you said this to me. 'It's not like graduation means a lifetime parting. We have email and twitter'."

"....."

"But you're wrong Kagoshima... I'll, I'll have to return someday."

The time traveler returns to her time.

It was an exceedingly obvious fact.

"And once that happens, I'll never be able to come to this era again. I won't be able to see any of you again... I can't call, I can't email. All forms of exchange are prohibited."

"Wha... is that how it works..... you can't come for a vacation or something?"

On my question, Kagurai-senpai shook her head to and frow. Her long hair matched the movements of her neck, swaying along with her.

"Once the determined period is over, you cannot return to a time period you've been dispatched to again. That's what's been decided."

"... Why?"

"To make sure something like this doesn't happen, right?"

Kagurai-senpai gave a self-tortured laugh.

Meaning, to make sure they didn't develop more attachment than necessary for the time they were dispatched to.

"... Orino and Kikyouin won't be a problem. I hear Kurisu's going to return someday, but her regulations aren't as strict. She said she'd be able to pay a visit to this world around three times a year... so it's just me... you know."

She gazed at me with her pupils shaking with sorrow.

"I'm the only one who'll never see you again. That fact made me excessively vexed, miserable, irritated—and lonely....."

"....."

The artificial intelligence deciphered those strong feelings.

I couldn't say anything. Before her heartrending profile, my words wouldn't come out.

"Lately, by the time I notice it, I'm always thinking about you. When I went to choose a swimsuit for the training camp, I was wondering what sort of swimsuit you might like..."

"....."

"I kept fantasizing about what would happen if you assaulted me, and ended up buying a box of condoms..."

"... U-um."

"The truth is, I didn't take the name AMLO from the Gundam pilot. It means Akira Monyumi LOve..."

"Aren't you being a bit too forward!?"

And that naming sense is painful!

No, I know it might be rude to say, but...!

"There's no helping it! I mean, I love you!"

"Urk..."

Eating a super straight refutation, I was hard-pressed for an answer. Kagurai-senpai was also soon taken aback, her face growing even redder as she hung her head.

No seriously, what is this.

It's so awkward, I can't get serious.

“... So when did you notice?”
“Wha!? M-my feelings for you!?”

“No! I mean the truth!”
“Oh... what, so you’re talking about that.”

Kagurai-senpai breathed a relieved sigh.

“I noticed the truth... even I don’t know when. You could call the poem your childhood friend gave me an opportunity if you wanted to... but the truth is, I might have noticed a long, long time before that.”

The forty-fifth time’s me was entrusted a tanka from Kai, apparently. What could be called the keyword... a single poem.

... But for his trigger to be a poem, Kai’s as cool as ever. My triggers were, ‘Widow’ and ‘Orino-san’s jugs’, nothing but that stuff...

“I ran away from that thought... I averted my eyes. Perhaps I was denying it somewhere in my heart, that I had fallen in love with a human of this era. So it took more than a month and a half to notice this shoddy reality.”

It took me that long to notice I loved you.

Kagurai-senpai’s face reddened as she kept coming out with things that made me embarrassed to listen to.

... And wait, she named the freaking thing Akiramonyumilove, and only noticed her affection during training camp... a maiden’s heart truly is complex.

“Was it for I fell, asleep whilst yearning for her, that she did stop by? Had I known it was a dream, I would not have woken up.”

Kagurai-senpai’s gaze flowed to the full moon in the night sky, she serenely recited the poem.

“Simply put, ‘I thought of you as I fell asleep, so you showed up in my dreams. Once I knew it was all a dream, I wished I never woke up.’ Something like that. Expressing the pains of love, Ono no Komachis love song.”

“.....”

“I got the feeling it severely and cynically described my current predicament.”

Sure enough, you could say that tanka was a perfect fit for the current Kagurai-senpai.

Whose mind raced towards her loved one as she drifted to sleep, a single young girl.

In this virtual world that would never end.

It had surpassed ready wit... into just a spoiler.

“Now then. I’ve said plenty of what I wanted to.”

With a breath, Kagurai-senpai held out her hand. A pale-blue panel manifested underneath it.

“Whoah!?”

“Don’t be surprised by that much. I told you this is a virtual world. As long as I’m aware of that, I’m more than capable of exhibiting my own powers.”

She operated the panel with accustomed hands. The blue panels expanded further and further around Kagurai-senpai, with circular radar-like screens and bar graphs popping up as well.

Amazing. How super SF.

As I gazed, just a little moved, Kagurai-senpai continued manipulating the panel at a speed my eyes couldn’t stop on.

Al of a sudden—a static noise raced across the space. The scenery greatly warped, Nngggggg, the grating sound of glass just before it shatters pierced into my ears.

“W-what are you doing?”

“If I explained the process, I doubt you’d understand it, so to put in absurdly simple terms, I’m luring out the creator of this world of dreams.”

While she said that, her hands didn’t stop moving. The noise sounding out gradually increased in density, what’s more, it was getting louder. Eventually—‘that’ appeared.

“You’ve made your descent. That is the Creator of this world, AMLO’s core. If I defeat her, we’ll be able to escape from this space.”

“So that’s... Akiramonyumilove.”

“Don’t call it that!”

I was hit. AMLO took on human form. It stood on the water’s surface like that was the natural thing to do. Dark as a whole, I could only make it out by silhouette, but that was...

“... Doesn’t she resemble you, Kagurai-senpai?”

“It seems she’s using me as the model.”

Boop, Kagurai-senpai pushed strongly against a single body.

The next instant, her body was enveloped in a white light. The light faded away, her garments had changed to resemble a medieval night. There were four diamond-shaped wings on her back, her hand gripped a blue sword.

“Y-you transformed!”

“Quit acting so surprised over everything.”

She said tiredly, shifting her gaze to the water’s surface. The black shadow taking on Kagurai-senpai’s shape silently moved its hand. In that hand, a sword of exactly the same design as Kagurai-senpai’s appeared. Though its color was a uniform black.

“As her birth mother, destroying that one is my duty.”

Kagurai-senpai’s eyes were no longer those of a maiden in love.

The eyes of a warrior.

Brandishing her near-future design sword, she lowered her stance.

“Once you know it’s a dream, you have to wake up.”

The next instant, she kicked the ground, charging at AMLO with explosive leg-strength. The shadow moved to match her.

Blue and black warrior collided.

Sword mingled with sword, the dull sound ringing out the signal of the war’s onset.

“.....”

With a blank look, my mouth idiotically hung open, I watched the battle that unfolded.

No, if I said watched, it would be a mistake.

To put it bluntly, the two of them were moving so fast, I couldn’t see anything. They raced left and right through space at an outrageous speed, my eyes couldn’t keep up. What’s more, with the night lowering my eyesight, their colorations of blue and black made for the worst combination.

... I can’t depict this battle at all.

I could barely manage to pick up the sound alone, so if you want me to do my best and describe it,

It went bang, and then swish, boom and then fwwwish, wwwsssh, kkkkkn, ddrrrrrrr, kaboom, something like that.

... How old am I?

The point is, it was that level of amazing battle. No matter how I focused my eyes, the most I could do was pick up the sparks born of the impact of attack and defense.

At times, I could see the two of them, the moment they halted to change direction, but every time I caught sight of them, the weapons they held had changed, and I had no idea what was going on.

Can that sword shift into different weapons?

After the battle of which I could only pick up lights and sounds continued a while—

“—!”

Of the two combatants, the blue one was sent flying my way. She landed... no, collided with the beach, grandly scattering its sand. I hurriedly raced over to her.

“A-are you alright!?”

“... Yeah, I’m fine. I let my guard down a bit.”

With a strong nod, she charged at the enemy once more, going into another high-speed battle.

But given a bit more time, she was blown towards the beach again. I raced over again and called out.

“Are you alright?”

“... I let my guard down.”

She charged at the enemy again. A while later, she was back.

“... Um.”

“I just let my guard down!”

She charged (et cetera.)

“Umm, Kagurai-senpai...”

“.....”

“Are you losing?”

It may be somewhat rude, but I went right out with it.

I mean...

“A moment ago, you were completely in a ‘all that’s left is to beat her’ mood. You said something cool about being her birth-parent, and acted as if you had some to spare.”

“..... I just noticed something terrible.”

Half-buried in the sand, Kagurai-senpai spoke awkwardly with her eyes averted from me.

“AMLO was stored on my computer. In the computer where I filed all my combat data... that’s why, how should I put it...”

“... It learned your combat patterns?”

A stiff nod of the head. ‘Twas somewhat cute.

“None of my techniques are getting through...”

“S-so what are you going to do...?”

“What am I going to do...”

Wait a second. Hold it right there.

“So that AMLO thing holds exactly the same power as you? It truly is your shadow... how are we supposed to overcome an enemy equal in all regards...”

“No, we’re not equal.”

“What... ah, I see, you’re right. There’s no way you could be equal! A copy cannot triumph over the original...”

Once I had said that much, I noticed.

The fact that Kagurai-senpai was making an extraordinarily troubled face.

“... I usually fight as a combo with Gakuta. So that’s what’s recorded in all my combat data. ALMO boasts the combat power of me plus Gakuta. In contrast, I left Gakuta home this time. Even worse... he’s offline.”

“... You mean,”

“I’m the complete underdog. I have almost no chance of victory...”

A great fountain of sweat poured down Kagurai-senpai's face. For her to even break into a cold sweat, this virtual world is really well made; I digress. Aren't we really screwed here? At the end of the end, there's nothing to be done.

"I-in that case, you have to start growing now, Kagurai-senpai!"
"How's that supposed to work!?"
"In shonen manga, when the type of enemy that takes your data appears, they generally mature and work it out somehow! Please go make the enemy think, 'The bastard's growing stronger in the midst of combat...!'"
"If it ain't gonna happen, it ain't gonna happen."
"Then don't you have a technique you definitely can't use or something? Those sorts of moves that they definitely can't use, but you know they're going to end up using in the end. A technique you definitely can't use just as much as you won't push a button that says you definitely can't push it? Don't you have a Balse sort of move!?"
"Like hell I have something that convenient!"

As we held a merry ruckus, I suddenly felt something was wrong. Why wasn't the enemy attacking? It's not like she was the wort of Super Sentai monster that would kindly wait for us to finish... as the thought struck me, I turned my head to the sea. I immediately grasped the reason.

"-----." AMLO was storing up energy. She shifted the shape of her black sword into a cannon, pointing the muzzle towards us. Even my eyes could comprehend that energy had begun to amass in the barrel.

"Lost cannon..."
Kagurai-senpai's face went pale beside me.
"Among the many shapes my sword, Lill Sordia can take, it's the form that boasts the greatest lethality... this is bad, if that fires--"

In the middle of her line, it fired.
As expected of an AI. It didn't even try to read the mood.
An extra-large laser, perhaps two meters across, was emitted. The surge of

pitch-black energy assailed us. Knowing the terror of this Lost Cannon weapon, Kagurai-senpai was slow to respond. Precisely because it was her own technique, she was able to imagine its destructive power, making her a moment behind.

That's why... I was the faster one.

The moment it understood a weapon was being pointed at Kagurai-senpai, my body moved on reflex. I covered the girl collapsed on the beach, using my whole body to envelop hers.

My entire being became a shield to protect her.

“K-Kagoshima!?”

I frantically contained a struggling Kagurai-senpai.

No, but I wonder what's going to happen here.

Does Kagurai-senpai have come convenient item that'll restore me no matter how my body breaks? Or could it be that if I die here, my body in real life will get out unharmed?

Well, it seems more likely that if I die here, my mind will crumble in reality as well.

But as a man, I doubt I had any other option.

The black flash mercilessly passed through us.

Strangely, there was no pain.

I recalled the time I went to buy games with Kagurai-senpai.

When a fire broke out at that building in front of the station.

Kagurai-senpai desperately tried to resolve the incident, but I was desperate all the same.

... To be frank, all my efforts could be called running in circles, rather, I was completely getting in the way of any progress. Even so, back then, I knew I wanted to protect Kagurai-senpai.

Just as I did now.

“That's right, Kagoshima.”

Enveloped in that black light, I heard a voice.

“You always tried to protect her. There were times where you failed, and times you miss the mark, but... you were always trying to protect her.”

The voice came from behind me, in the direction of the enemy. It was there that I finally noticed.

The enemy's attack definitely passed us, but that really was all it did.

Split in two at the center of the beam, it passed by both our flanks, like Moses' parting of the red sea.

Someone standing imposingly before us, with just a single swing of the sword, had bisected the massive beam and protected us.

“Haah!”

A rending fighting cry and that someone's sword flashed into a spear, dispersing the flash in its entirety.

And that individual turned around to look at us.

A black mantle that concealed their body. Hair that just reached their shoulders. A mask with a sharp design.

“T-the masked man!?”

Kagurai-senpai cried out. This man was the masked man I supposedly met on the third loop.

“Kagurai Monyumi. As you are now, you won't be able to defeat her. So just sit tight and wait with Kagoshima.”

The mask man said, his form suddenly vanishing. The enemy soon disappeared in succession.

It did seem they had entered a high-speed battle.

“You're kidding me!”

Kagurai-senpai stood, glaring into the emptiness. Able to eyeball the unperceivably fast exchange, she made a face as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

“Who in god's name... is that masked man?”

“Eh? Didn't you say the masked man's identity was Shakuji Hihihiko-san?”

“That's what I thought. But Hihihiko doesn't fight like that. And... the weapon he's holding is...”

From my glance at it a moment ago, the masked man was holding a straight sword with exactly the same design as Kagurai-senpai's.

“... Why does he have Lill Sordia?”

“Your Lill Sordia isn’t mass-produced?”

“That’s a memento from Gakuta. There can’t be two of them in the world, and only Gakuta and I should be able to handle it...!”

Yet as we were speaking, the battle already seemed to be nearing its hasty conclusion.

“Lill Sordia—mode change—Category Zero—Sword of Sin.”

It took a while to notice the abnormality.

Outside of my attention, swords had been positioned all over. The sea, the beach, the rocks, the houses, even the air. Would it be more accurate to say they had been pierced into space itself? Those countless blades glimmering dully under the light of the moon were practically like the stars in the night sky. Japanese sword, rapier, shamshir, bastard sword, shortsword... and so forth, of all times and places, of scattered designs, sizes and eras, the swords buried up the area.

“This technique is...” Beside me, Kagurai-senpai grimaced. “Gakuta’s technique... I can’t make use of it yet, it boasts an exceedingly high level of difficulty, the strongest secret technique...”

The speed the swords appeared at accelerated.

At that moment, AMLO appeared over the sea. No, while it looked like she had just appeared, if I had to be more precise, because she had stopped, I had gained the ability to see her.

Even I could tell her stagnation was the perfect opportunity.

“World over.”

From nowhere in particular, I heard a declaration of victory.

The countless swords embedded in space all disappeared. In moments, the enemy over the sea exploded with a roaring rumble.

... Once again, I couldn’t see anything. Kagurai-senpai was making an astonished face, so I could tell something amazing must have happened.

Presumably the countless swords set in space all fired off at once, or in some order, unfolding into a consecutive stream of piercing shots at a super-high-speed pace.

I know I shouldn't say it, but it wasn't an enjoyable battle to watch at all. Through the rising white smoke, the masked man naturally walked over the ocean towards us. He walked with composure.

"... Who are you?"

Kagurai-senpai readied her sword and stood on guard.

"I'm you, Monyumi."

Once the masked man had come close, he answered so with a collected voice.

"... I didn't ask to be answered in riddle."

"It's not a riddle. I mean what I say, I say what I mean. Rather, notice my voice already."

Voice.

Right. The masked man I met on the third loop, as in the 'man' part of a title should have been a man. And yet, this whole while, the masked man was speaking in the voice of a woman.

A voice I'd heard somewhere before.

"Ah, but it must be that. Apparently, it's hard for humans to recognize their own voice. I guess that's why the past me didn't notice. And Kagoshima didn't notice because, well, you know who we're dealing with."

As she said that, the masked man easily pulled off her helmet.

Seeing her face, I was at a loss for words. I was experienced shocking development after shocking development today, but this impact topped them all.

Once the mask came off—Kagurai Monyumi appeared.

"E-e-eeeeh?"

I ended up comparing the Kagurai-senpai before me's face to the one beside me. The one before my eyes was Kagurai-senpai herself. If I had to raise a difference, her hairstyle was all I could notice. In contrast to the Kagurai-senpai with me, whose hair went to her waist, the

formerly-masked Kagurai-senpai's went to her shoulders.

"Don't tell me you're..."

"That's right, past me. I am a Kagurai Monyumi who came from just a little further in the future."

A dumbfounded Kagurai-senpai, and a carefree Kagurai-senpai.

... How misleading. Let's go with Kagurai-senpai (Present) and Kagurai-senpai (Future).

"To clean up after my own mistakes, I came all the way from the future. It is impossible for the current you to defeat AMLO. Then you simply have to beat it after you've grown stronger."

Kagurai-senpai (Future) spoke more light-hearted than anything else. So that's why the masked man could use a secret technique Kagurai-senpai (Present) couldn't use. No, but still, I can't conceal my surprise. To think the masked man would be Kagurai-senpai of all people... It looks like this time truly was Kagurai Monyumi's story from start to finish.

"... I see. There's a mountain of things I want to ask, but you're not going to answer any of them. Are you, future me."

As she said that, Kagurai-senpai (Present) changed from her knight outfit to her violet yukata.

"As expected of past me. You're quick on the uptake. Well, don't think too hard about it. You'll be in my shoes before long."

"Hmm. Then I should start striving towards it."

The two Kagurai-senpais conversed.

What a surreal scene.

"Still, Kagoshima..." Kagurai-senpai (Present) took a glance at me.

"You mistook future me as a man..."

"Eh? N-no! I have no recollection of that! So the fault doesn't lie with me, but with third loop's me!"

"Haha. Don't condemn Kagoshima for it, past me. It's only natural that Kagoshima mistook me for a man. I was wearing a mask, and I went out of my way to put out a man's voice. Ahem, ahem, like this."

Said Kagurai-senpai (Future) in a low voice. In a virtual world, it seems you can freely change voice as well. This really is a world with a high level of freedom.

“If it was before he spotted my back, I could’ve changed my whole appearance too.”

That moment I spotted her on the coastal crags, Kagurai-senpai (Future) hurriedly stuck on a mask and changed her voice, apparently. After that, she perfectly concealed herself, observing us as she waited for the enemy to appear.

“Which would mean future Kagurai-senpai only appeared on the third time.”
“No, that’s not all. Kagoshima, we’ve met once more.”

Kagurai-senpai (present)’s face flushed a bit as she spoke with a complacent smile.

“What’s there to hide, the one who took a bath with Kagoshima on the thirteenth loop was me!”

“”Hah!?””

Now normally, “What!? The Kagurai-senpai from back there was actually a Kagurai-senpai from the future!?” I might have shouted in surprise. But as I don’t maintain my memories, “I took a bath with Kagurai-senpai!?” was the real question, and “The hell you doin’, future me!?” Kagurai-senpai (Present) screamed.

“I had my hair wrapped in a towel, so it looks like he didn’t notice. It looked fun, so I just went with the flow and kept deceiving him.”

“For reals!? Eh, wait a second, I don’t remember that at all... uwahh, why don’t I remember, dammit...”

“When you’re just little old me, what are you doing, future me!? The hell are you showing off my body for!? No, it’s your body too, I get it, but...!”

“Ha Ha Ha.”

“W-wait a second. Is it possible for a man and woman to enter the same bath, and that be all that happens...? My surging teenage libido was able to stand before Kagurai-senpai’s naked body without doing anything...?”

“–! Oy! H-how far did you go, future meeee!?”

“Ha Ha Ha Ha.”

Looking over my and Kagurai-senpai (Present)'s pandemonium, Kagurai-senpai (Future) laughed happily to herself. Judging by her reaction, and my cowardly nature, I'm sure nothing happened between us.

... Nothing happened, right?

I trust in you, thirteenth me.

"Fret not, past me. You'll know eventually."

On those words of jest, Kagurai-senpai (Present) breathed out a deep sigh, "Eventually, huh... hey, future me. When are you, anyway?" she asked lightly. She was likely wondering, 'When will I be able to use the secret move,' not meaning too much when she asked the question. Like confirming at what level you'll learn the skill you want to use, a truly light question.

"When, huh... well let's see."

But Kagurai-senpai (Future)'s expression darkened. Her eyes shifted to me, and for just a moment, she made a fleeting smile. Before long, it shifted to a mischievous grin.

"I'm the Kagurai Monyumo from after Kagoshima achieves the harem end."

She completely played it off with a joke.

"... What's up with that? Well, if you don't want to answer, so be it."

Kagurai-senpai (Present) seemed fed-up, but Kagurai-senpai (Future)'s suggestive smile didn't crumble. In the following silence, the distant night sky bent out of shape.

"Oh, so it started to crumble."

Starting with the night sky, a bending and creaking were born in items here and there.

The world of dreams that had lost its creator was beginning to crumble.

"Then I'll be disappearing a step ahead."

Kagurai-senpai (Future)'s body started to fade from the feet. The ankles, the knees, she slowly disappeared as if being eroded away. When she had lost a majority of her lower body, she looked at me.

"Kagoshima. If I felt like it, I could have prevented all of you from being sealed

in this virtual world. But I didn't. Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"... Yes."

Having come from the future, she could have taken precautions to prevent the incident itself.

The reason she purposely overlooked its outbreak.

She didn't even have to say it. The way Kagurai-senpai (Present) beside me ashamedly turned her face the other way was more proof than anything.

"And past me. You're finally alone together. If there's something you want to say, you'd better say it."

"Wha-"

"Farewell."

And the girl who came from the not-so-distant future disappeared.

In the world that had started to crumble, only Kagurai-senpai (Present) and I remained.

"... Good grief. She says what she wants and disappears... what a selfish person."

"Kagurai-senpai."

Now that it was just the two of us, I saw it as the right time to ask. What I'd been putting off this entire time.

"When I wake up from this world, am I going to forget everything?"

"..... Yes, you will."

Kagurai-senpai quietly nodded.

Just as I expected, it looks like the fiftieth me... the final me won't maintain his memories either.

That Kagurai-senpai was a time traveler, that she fought unknown to the world at large.

And that she told me she loved me.

I would, forget it all.

"... Can't we do something about that?"

When I pleaded in a pitiful voice, Kagurai-senpai burst into laughter. Hers was a discerning smile.

“Kagoshima. You’re a dense idiot, but you’re kind with a strong sense of justice. That’s why if you ever notice our identities, I’m sure your heart will be terribly hurt.”

Our. I had a general idea what she was implying.
Now that I had begun to notice, I had a general idea.

“Every time Orino leaves from stomach pain, every time Kikyouin says something about ghosts and goes off, every time Kurisu mentions magic and disappears, and every time I suddenly fall asleep, your face will go pale and you’ll worry from the bottom of your heart.”

“.....”

“That’s what I—fear the most. If you end up noticing, you won’t be able to smile so innocently anymore. This time, when I revealed I was a time traveler to you, you started making a fretful face the whole time. It’s not like you at all.”

That’s why, Kagoshima, Kagurai-senpai said with gentle eyes.

“You really don’t have to notice.”

“I...”

“I fell in love with a man who laughed like an idiot without knowing a thing.”

I couldn’t say a word. It’s not like I accepted what Kagurai-senpai was saying. This relationship was surely mistaken. Without knowing a single thing about the other person, not sharing a single worry, doing nothing but smiling and laughing, perhaps I was an outrageously cruel existence.

A great many people would surely say it’s wrong.

But she told me that was fine.

The world proceeded towards its destruction. Apart from the sandy beach where we stood, a majority of the space had disappeared. Wherever the scenery had crumbled, a black void of emptiness remained.

“A world of dreams, huh...”

Gazing at the unrealistic scene, Kagurai-senpai quietly spoke.

“This virtual world truly was a world of dreams, but... come to think of it, my time in this era is but another dream as well. I’m a person who never should have been here.”

“Please, don’t say something so sad.”

“But it’s true. I’ll have to wake up someday. I’ll have to go back someday. A dream is, only a dream.”

“But Kagurai-senpai.”

“What is it?”

“Even if it happened in a dream, sadness is sadness, and happiness is happiness.”

In the end.

No one can say what’s reality and illusion.

“You’re right. I learned that detestably well this time around. Thanks that that, I’ve undone the threads.”

“Undone?”

“I’m saying I’m ready to be rejected by you.”

Kagurai-senpai said it especially lightly.

“No, I’m...”

“What, you’ll go out with me?”

“.....”

“I’m joking. Don’t make that troubled face. That was in bad taste.”

She lightly apologized and gazed into the distance.

“You and I can’t be together. We live in different times, nothing we can do about it.”

As if she had accepted it all, her gentle voice resounded out.

“Kagurai Montumi was never a capture target for Kagoshima Akira. That’s all there is to it.”

Your life doesn’t have a Monyumi ending.

Even to this point, Kagurai-senpai said something Kagurai-senpai-esque.

“But the fact I fell in love with you is not a lie. Even if it was a love that would never bear fruit, I shall call this feeling my first love.”

“... Um, you’re not embarrassed to say that?”

“Fu fu fu. I’ve gradually stopped caring. Want me to call you darling.”

“Oh knock it off, honey.”

And we both exchanged a laugh.

When I was soon going to forget everything, the atmosphere didn’t turn dark.

Kagurai-senpai was laughing, so I had to laugh myself.

She had accepted we would have to part someday, yet even so, she laughed.

“I can’t be the same lonely girl forever. I’ll use this broken heart to grow. I’m sure the future me cut her hair as a sign of her resolve.”

“... Ah, I see.”

I didn’t notice at all. Cutting one’s hair from lost love does feel a bit old-fashioned, but Kagurai-senpai does seem like the sort.

“But in that case, Kagoshima, whose route are you going to hop on board?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“You’d better watch out, Kagoshima. I’m sure I’m not the only one who wanted to go to the beach alone with you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I’m positive.”

Yeaah, I wonder.

Whose route I’m going to follow in the future. There’s no Monyumi Ending, she said so herself, but—

Mh?

Huh?

Wait a tic.

According to Kagurai-senpai, once she finishes her mission, she won’t be able to go to a time period she’s been dispatched to again. But then—how did Kagurai-senpai (Future) come to see us in this era?

Was this time alone an exception? It’s also possible that Kagurai-senpai (Future) was a Kagurai Monyumi from when her mission in this time wasn’t over yet... there might even be a loophole.

The harem end Kagurai-senpai (Future) brought up in jest.

A harem end is supposed to be the conclusion where everyone’s happy. And yet—

Our footing was finally starting to disappear; I was seriously such things when Kagurai-senpai lightly called over.

“Oy, Kagoshima. Give me your hand. If you’re not holding my hand, you’ll be left behind in this space.”

“Nn, e-eeh!? Why didn’t you say that earlier!?”

I frantically held out my hand.

“Sorry, I lied.”

She said.

Kagurai-senpai gave my hand a strong jerk.

And—she kissed me.

[IMAGE]

She went right ahead and stole my lips. Plundered them. It was the sort of violent, forceful kiss that would be cool if a wild kind of guy did it. Though our positions were reversed.

My first kiss. A sweet impact raced from my lips to my brain. A terrifying impact boasting fearsome destructive power, and all the important-sounding somethings I had been considering to that point had made off somewhere. After a slow five seconds went by, our lips separated.

To a dazed me, Kagurai-senpai sadistically laughed.

“Hahaha. You should see the look on your face, Kagoshima.”

“No, I mean, I mean... you’re red too, Kagurai-senpai.”

“Mrk. A-am I...”

“... That was my first.”

“It was mine too.”

“..... But, huh? This is a virtual world, and I’m going to forget all about it so... can I really call this my first?”

“You don’t really have to count it. Rather, you’ll forget, so you have no way of counting it.”

“You’re right, but,”

“But I’m going to count it.”

Kagurai-senpai plainly declared.

“My first kiss was with you. You can give me that much, can’t you?”

There was no way I could refute it. I quietly nodded.

“Thank you.”

Our bodies had begun growing lighter from the feet up.

This midsummer dream was finally greeting its end.

The moment the dream ended—

She showed me an extraordinary smile.

“I love you, Kagoshima.”

Epilogue

The second morning of training came.
I woke up to the sound of girls whispering amongst themselves.

“Then we were sealed inside that looping virtual world without knowing it, and you resolved the matter? ... I can’t believe it.”

That was Orino-san’s voice. Kurisu-chan followed on.

“And you’re telling us we regained only the memories of the first day we experienced in reality, and forgot all the other looping first days from the virtual world. How peculiar. So anyways... was there one of those things sticking on Kagoshima-senpai’s head stuck to the rest of us as well?”

Kagurai-senpai spoke as well.

“Today is the second day of training camp, following on from the first day before the loop began; Kikyouin’s reverse-pandification is more proof than anything.”

“Enough about that!”

Kikyouin-san’s voice too...

“... Come to think of it, my staff still reeks of watermelon... that staffs fire element, so you can’t wash it with water... really, what am I going to do about this...”

“Ah, Kagurai-senpai. Kagoshima-kun’s about to get up.”

“What? This is bad, I haven’t removed his patch yet.”

I abruptly lifted my body. In my half-asleep head, I absentmindedly gazed at the girls in their pajamas, before reeling back in surprise.

“Uwah! What are you people doing!?”

When I asked, everyone left their troubled eyes to wander. Kagurai-senpai opened her mouth.

“Umm, r-right. The truth is, we thought we’d give you a bit of a shocker when you opened your eyes. But you got up right before we could prepare it.”

“Eh? Are you for real!? Then I’m sorry for waking up!”

“... That’s where you apologize? That’s a wonderful need to please you’ve got there.”

Ah, I see. Then that thing Kagurai-senpai frantically hid, that patch with a number of fine wires running from it was in preparation for the surprise, surely. My eyes suddenly—met with Kagurai-senpai’s.

“Good morning, Kagoshima.”

“Good morning.”

“It’s the second day of camp.”

“That it is.”

“It’s not the first day anymore.”

“I know.”

“Are you fully awake?”

“Yes. I get the feeling I had quite a long dream, but I’m up and ready now.”

“What sort of dream was it?”

“I’ve forgotten.”

“I see.”

“But it was a fun dream.”

I see, she nodded and gave a small laugh.

I might be imagining things, but today, she looked even more mature than she did yesterday. A bit more sensual, and a bit more beautiful.

Well, there’s no way a human can change so much in a day, so it was surely my imagination.

“Alright. Everyone’s awake. Now let’s hurry and play. Time is of the essence.”

And like that.

Our second day of training camp began.

Postscript

Hey, could this possibly be the first volume of a light novel where they go to camp, and it ends at the first day? Or so I'd like to think, this is Nozomi Kota. It's been a while.

Now that it's over, I've looked back and realized, this work takes place over the span of a single day. And so what, you might ask, and I have nothing to say to that. Having a volume end in twenty-four hours is kinda nice, I arbitrarily believe. I'm free to believe. Thoughts are free as the wind.

Now thanks to the following.

My editor. I've been in your care once more. I don't think I'd be able to write this time's story on my own. I'll be counting on you from hereon as well.

Takatsuki Ichi-sama. Thank you for the wonderful illustrations each and every time. Your illustrations always bring power to the work.

Finally, to all you readers. You have my sincere gratitude. I hope you'll stick around for the next volume too.

Well then, if the chance arises, let us meet again.

– Nozomi Kota